

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE DEVIL SKIER





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
DEVIL SKIER**

Karen Sulzenberger, a top star of the German national ski team, is afraid. Mysterious warning messages make her very unsettled. Who is trying to get this attractive athlete off her track to success? On skis and snowboards, The Three Investigators start their investigations in the mountains near the town of Vail—the venue of the International Ski Championships. But even the detectives cannot prevent the first accident on the ski slopes—at high speed, Karen races towards a deadly obstacle...

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Devil Skier

*Original German text by
Ben Nevis*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

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(The Three ???: Piste Devil)

by

Ben Nevis

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Aiga Rasch

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1. A Surprising Call

Bob was surprised that it was his history teacher Mrs Maggie Seven, of all people, who was at the other end of the phone line. Actually, he was expecting another call.

At the very first ring, he snatched the receiver off the phone because Jupiter and Pete, the other two members of The Three Investigators, should have contacted him by now.

It was early afternoon and the two detectives were off to ambush a mysterious car tyre slasher. It was not a pleasant job in this uncomfortable weather outside.

Bob had taken on the task of waiting at Headquarters and taking any necessary action from there. Headquarters was an old mobile home trailer located at The Jones Salvage Yard, and it served as the operations centre for The Three Investigators. The plan was such that when Bob received a call from either of his two friends, he only needed to locate Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department to proceed with the arrest of the tyre slasher.

But now it wasn't Jupiter or Pete who called. It was Bob's history teacher, Mrs Seven. She had never called him before. Their relationship at school was marked by Bob's lack of interest in history lessons. He just couldn't meet up to the standards of the clever Jupiter, who was also known as the 'mastermind'.

"Yes, Mrs Seven," Bob stammered. "Hello, how are you?"

"Well, as long as I don't look into your history work, I'm fine," said Mrs Seven smugly. "However, I'm not calling regarding school work. I've heard that Jupiter, Pete and you run some kind of detective agency when you're not at school."

"Yes," Bob proudly explained, and immediately became more talkative. "We call ourselves The Three Investigators. We take all sorts of cases, and have been very successful so far."

"All right, then you should have some experience. Maybe I have a job for you," said Mrs Seven. "I wouldn't have contacted you during school time, of course, when you should be studying, but it's now one week into winter vacation..." She paused. "So you might want to listen to my little problem."

"Sure thing," Bob replied. Actually The Three Investigators didn't really care too much whether a new case came during school time or vacation, but he didn't say anything about it to her.

Mrs Seven suggested discussing the matter at her home. "It's not easy to talk about it on the phone. Probably this might not even be a case worth investigating. I might have exaggerated it out of caution or fear."

"Well, Mrs Seven, we're willing to listen," Bob replied. After all, a seemingly harmless trace had often led to an exciting case. "I'll be meeting Jupiter and Pete later. I think we can drop by tomorrow afternoon." Mrs Seven agreed.

After getting her address, Bob hung up.

He looked out the window thoughtfully. With all the problems he faced in his history lessons, he still found that the teacher with the wild red hair knew how to conduct the class with a firm hand. As it was, she was almost always fair to him, although sometimes he disagreed with the grades he received. But at least today, she remembered him. Perhaps she appreciated him as a person... Jupiter and Pete of course, too.

Bob wondered what it was all about. Mrs Seven lived alone, as far as he knew. Once she had invited her students to her home. At that time he had noticed a picture of her father hanging on the wall. He was an immigrant from Germany.

Bob was too much of a detective to stop speculating about what was behind Mrs Seven's mysterious call. School? Threats? Relatives? Bob sat in front of the phone and let his thoughts drift. His assumptions had become more and more ridiculous.

As he was about to defend Mrs Seven against a bunch of vengeful classmates—among which were those who didn't like Bob—the phone rang again. This time Bob reached for the receiver only after the third ring. It took that long to wake him up from his daydream.

But again it was not Jupiter or Pete, but his girlfriend Elizabeth. "Hi, Bob! I wanted to call you about tonight. Don't you want to go to the movies with Kelly, Lys and me?" Kelly and Lys were the girlfriends of Pete and Jupiter.

Elizabeth reminded him about the latest James Bond movie currently showing at the cinemas. She was sure that that would be tempting for the three super detectives. When Bob explained that Jupiter and Pete were out on an investigation at that moment, he got ridiculed. "You don't even have time during the holidays! Hopefully you three super Bonds can handle your opponents as well as James..."

Bob promised to get back to her if Jupiter and Pete came back in time. It was pretty exhausting, he thought. As if school and investigations weren't already keeping them busy enough, The Three Investigators now had to fit in their girlfriends as well. On the other hand, if all activities were this much fun...

Of course Jupiter and Pete came back too late for the movie. This was all the more annoying as they had been waiting in vain for the tyre slasher. When a sharp wind came up in the afternoon, the two detectives had decided to go home. However, a nasty surprise awaited them at Pete's car. Apparently, the tyre slasher had struck again. One of the tyres was flat. Changing tyres wasn't exactly very enjoyable for Pete and super brain Jupiter didn't bend a finger to help, of course.

Now the two detectives sat completely exhausted on the old armchairs at Headquarters. Jupiter listlessly flipped through a newspaper. "Top two teams meet in the Basketball League," he read.

"I don't care," Pete hummed.

"International Ski Championships in Vail: Battle of the Favourites—Picabo Rhoades versus Karen Sulzenberger."

"I don't care," Pete hummed again. "Although this Picabo Rhoades is really cute and has the funniest smile since the invention of Halloween." He stretched out his legs and yawned.

But Bob knew how to get his friends back on their feet. "Well, you two, put the paper aside. I have something for you. Guess who called?"

"One of the basketball players. Or Michael Jordan," Jupiter suggested.

Bob made a face.

"The girls," Pete said, bored.

"Right," Bob said, "but you already know that. Keep going! It's a woman we know very well."

"Know very well..." Jupiter thought. "Maybe Pete's sweet Picabo Rhoades?"

"What's the matter with you and that cute Picabo Rhoades all the time?" Bob asked. "But you're all wrong anyway. I told you, the person is familiar to us—with an emphasis on us, The Three Investigators!"

"But Bob, you should still know who Picabo Rhoades is," Jupe said. "Even if you're no longer into skiing since you took on snowboarding. Picabo Rhoades is the world champion in

downhill skiing and is one of the front runners in the International Ski Championships with 200 points, and is also the best female skier in the US.”

“And this coming weekend, the race will be at Vail,” Bob repeated. “Then we can watch them on TV. I want to test Pete’s taste!”

“I’m sure she’ll do well again. She’s racing on home ground,” said Jupiter. Actually he was not particularly interested in ski racing, but almost every piece of information, especially when it had to do with numbers and tables, he stored involuntarily in his brain. Thus he succeeded again and again in surprising people with peculiar details.

“Okay, Bob, you win,” Pete urged. “Who called? The tyre slasher?”

“No,” Bob said. “Our teacher, Mrs Seven, called.” He told Jupiter and Pete about Mrs Seven asking them for help. “I definitely agreed to hear her out. I hope you don’t mind just because she’s our teacher.”

Of course Bob was right about that, teacher or no teacher. The tyre slasher has got on everyone’s nerves and a little variety wouldn’t hurt. The mood of The Three Investigators rose immediately in view of a possible new case.

Jupiter also had a special relationship with Mrs Seven, but of a completely different kind. It happened again and again that he had to correct the teacher when she messed up the dates of historical events. “Maybe she just wants a little history coaching from me,” he said with played arrogance.

“I don’t think she needs it!” Pete laughed.

Jupiter knew the way to Mrs Seven’s apartment from his last visit with the school class. She lived in a charming older sublet house.

Her landlord was a formerly unsuccessful painter, who meanwhile worked in the advertising business, where he earned a lot of money and was known for his garish pictures and graphics. Jupiter had long planned to ask the artist if he could create an advertising campaign for The Three Investigators—at a special price, of course. But so far, the three detectives had never been without a case for long, and so Jupiter had not yet needed the contact through Mrs Seven.

Mrs Seven had already seen them through the window and was now waiting for The Three Investigators at the door. When they entered the apartment, Bob briefly considered whether he should negotiate a good mark in the next history assignment as a fee for the expected assignment. Normally they didn’t get anything for their investigations, but in this case...

They took a seat in the living room. On the table there was a Coke for everyone. Mrs Seven, as was her way, got right to the point. “I don’t know if you’re aware that my family was originally from Germany.” Bob wanted to nod, but she didn’t even wait for an answer. “One of my distant cousins from there was in the US since yesterday. She’s no stranger to many people. She’s a successful skier, Karen Sulzenberger.”

Jupiter breathed audibly. “The downhill star!” he said.

“That’s Picabo Rhoades’s rival,” Bob said.

“Yes, that’s right,” Mrs Seven replied and was pleased with the correct answer, just like at school.

“An ‘A’ grade for you, Bob,” Jupiter whispered ironically to Bob, because without his short lecture the day before, Bob could hardly have been able to shine like that.

Mrs Seven went on. “Karen has an important downhill race in Vail this week. But she’s worried, because during the last race in Europe, she has been receiving strange messages.”

“Threatening letters?” Bob asked.

“Yes, or no, at least messages that made her very unsettled.”

“What does the messages say?” Jupiter enquired.

“She’s received only two messages so far. One said ‘Trust no one’ and the other ‘You will lose soon’. That’s all.”

“What happened then?” Bob wanted to know.

“She showed the messages to her head coach. But he just tried to calm her down and told her not to take it seriously. Such a thing could happen to athletes.”

“But she hasn’t calmed down and that’s why we’re here now,” Pete concluded.

“You really will live up to your reputation,” said Mrs Seven. “Yes, I just wanted to ask you to take care of her a bit, so she can calm down and concentrate on her race. Probably there is really nothing behind this. Perhaps it’s someone who wants to make himself important. It happens all the time. There are crazy people who enjoy irritating others.”

“We will do our best,” Jupiter promised. “But how? It would be best, of course, if we went to Vail.”

“I might be able to get you a little vacation home there. It belongs to my landlord, the painter. I’ll tell him the situation and I think he won’t mind letting you stay there for a few days—provided he still recognizes his apartment after your stay.”

The Three Investigators grinned. “We will not leave a mess.” Jupiter assured her. “And we can do the dishes, too.” The prospect of a trip to the wintry Vail was tempting.

Mrs Seven nodded. “That sounds good. You could stay there till Sunday, the day of the race. Then Karen goes on to Canada, and I hope everything would be sorted out by then.”

The three detectives agreed immediately. “Just one more thing,” Jupiter asked. “How do we get to a star like Karen?”

“I’ll tell her you’re coming,” Mrs Seven replied. “You’ll have to come up with everything else. After all, you are three great detectives...”

2. A Dark Sign

The flight from Los Angeles to Denver went according to plan. Mrs Seven had paid for the plane tickets. The flight would take about two and a half hours. Then they had to make their way to Vail about 160 km west by car. With the prospect of a free extended winter weekend there, the mood among The Three Investigators was correspondingly exuberant.

Pete was considered a very good skier. Jupiter and Bob had already been on skis several times. But this time, Bob wanted to snowboard. Last winter he had completed a beginner snowboard course and it had been a lot of fun. Pete kept teasing Bob because of his switch to snowboarding, but Bob dismissed it as envy.

Even if it wasn't going to be an exciting case, they looked forward to a great weekend ahead. The girlfriends had been a little jealous and even a little angry—especially after the movie night had been cancelled. “Now we're on a winter vacation and you're still busy. I'm losing you to your detective work,” Elizabeth had complained to Bob.

Things were quite different for Jupiter because Lys—perhaps out of defiance—had said that she was happy to be able to spend the weekend reading in peace now. And she might as well go to a party on Saturday night alone. Jupiter, in any case, was annoyed.

In Denver, Pete rented an old Buick, into which the luggage and Pete's ski gear fit well. Pete had stowed his equipment very carefully as he had just received them as a Christmas present. Jupiter and Bob would be renting their equipment in Vail.

Shortly, they were on the highway to Vail. It was an impressive route. The mountains became more and more imposing, the area more lonely. Suddenly, the weather surprisingly changed. They headed straight for a dark cloud wall. Already the first drops fell, which soon turned into sleet and then into a dense drift of snow.

“Hopefully we won't get stuck,” Pete murmured. “We may have winter tyres, but if this continues, everything will soon be snowed in.”

“Fortunately, we have some lunch packages from Aunt Mathilda with us,” said Jupiter.

In the mountains, nature was very unpredictable. The snow was getting thicker and thicker. Pete had long since switched on the headlights. The cars in front of and behind them were hardly recognizable, let alone the street signs. Jupiter and Bob looked at each other with concern.

“Pete, you'd better slow down,” Bob said. Pete usually reacted annoyingly to criticism of his driving style, but now he said nothing and proceeded to slow down.

In the meantime, the road was noticeably uphill. Suddenly, two big red brake lights appeared in front of them, and Pete immediately stepped on the brakes. The Buick only had a little road contact, so it slipped. Just in time, the car came to a standstill. It almost bumped into the vehicle in front of them. Jupiter and Bob were hung in their seat belts. Meanwhile the car behind them, which had a bit more distance, had stopped as well.

“Lucky again,” Jupiter pushed out. “I'm glad you reacted so quickly.” Pete switched on the hazard lights and looked around.

In front of them stood a dark van with the inscription ‘SPEED’ on its back. “Aha,” Jupiter thought, “I guess we are going to the same place. SPEED is a big ski company.”

“Now they’re also stuck in the snow,” Pete remarked. The car behind have now begun to overtake them and the van slowly. By now, Pete could see that there were no more vehicles behind him. Carefully and slowly, he reversed the Buick a bit to leave a bigger distance between themselves and the van in front.

Then two people came out of the van and looked at the tyres. From their gestures, Pete figured that they wanted to put on snow chains.

“Shall we go out and help?” Bob suggested.

Pete opened the driver’s door and looked back briefly. The three detectives grabbed their jackets and gloves and jumped out of the Buick.

They walked along the van. The side door of the car was opened and Jupiter could see several long containers inside. “Probably ski equipment,” he thought. One of them had the word ‘Test Model’ written on it.

The wind drove thick snowflakes into their eyes. They could see the two men kneeling in front of the left front tyres. “Can we help you?” Pete called out to the men through the snow flurry. “Shall we get the other snow chain out of your van?”

“What do you want?” was the sharp answer. “Go away!”

“But all we wanted was...”

“Don’t you get it?” he shouted. “Get out of here!”

In the meantime, Pete had come close enough to be able to take a look at the two men despite the snow flurry. He didn’t see much, though. From one winter anorak, a grim, bearded face looked towards him. The other man was a little smaller, unshaven, no less unfriendly in his eyes.

“Go back to your car and get out of here,” the bearded man hissed once more. “We don’t like snoopers.” He stood up and closed the side door of the van with a strong push.

“You must be afraid of curious people,” Pete provoked them both. But Juve grabbed Pete’s arm stopping him from saying more.

“Fellows, let’s go,” Bob shouted as he turned back. “I guess we’re not welcome here. Let the two gentlemen shovel alone in the snow.”

The three went back to their Buick. “Hopefully our tyres will be able to take it, otherwise we will have to spend the night here with these friendly gentlemen,” Pete muttered. He trembled slightly as that encounter had not pleased him.

The car started well, and after a short spin of the tyres, the journey continued.

But Bob was still angry. “You offered your help, but they were so rude about it.”

“Perhaps they had something to hide,” Jupiter thought. “Their behaviour wasn’t normal after all. Or did we look that scary? If so, that would be new to me—nice and neat boys as we are.”

“I took a good look at their faces,” said Pete. “At least as far as the snow jackets would allow.”

“Maybe they were just angry that they had to put on the snow chains in such weather,” Bob said. But he didn’t quite believe it himself.

As time went by, the snow drift fortunately became weaker, and The Three Investigators were able to move faster towards their destination. They even managed to turn off to Vail without difficulty, even though the road signs were hardly visible under the blowing and frozen snow. As they went over an exit bridge towards the breathtaking scenery of Vail, the first ray of sunshine broke through the clouds, illuminating a beautifully curving white ski slope in the background.

The painter's apartment was located in a new, stylish building near the mountains. Along the way, the three drove past some of the bigger hotels in the town. From here one had a good view to the wonderful mountains and snow scenery.

In the meantime the sun had really come out and slowly the streets were filled with people again. Everyone was happy about the sudden end of the snow drift. After all, it was only around noon and they could still enjoy the rest of the day. A thick layer of fresh snow covered the streets and houses. For the skiers it was a very promising sight, because now there was wonderful powder snow on the slopes.

While Pete was clearing out the car, Jupiter and Bob ran to the nearest ski shop to rent their sports equipment, Jupiter looked for skis that weren't too long and Bob got skis and a good beginner snowboard.

It was impressive to stroll through the streets of Vail. Many houses in this winter town were built in Tyrolean style—after Tyrol in Western Austria. Jupiter and Bob liked that very much, especially having been in Austria last summer.

The people who ran around on the streets were mainly Americans, but there was also a swarm of Europeans as Vail seemed to be in fashion with them. Despite the colourful hustle and bustle, the town was calm, cosy, bright and almost cheerful in winter. But as Pete was waiting for them at the apartment, Bob and Jupiter did not allow themselves to be seduced by an extensive stroll. They could easily postpone it until later.

When the two returned to the apartment, Pete had already carried everything in there, unpacked it, took out the sleeping bags, and then got water boiling on the stove.

"I didn't even know you were so domestic," teased Jupiter.

Pete did not give an answer and instead pointed his friends to the numerous pictures on the walls—all of them clearly works of their host. They were colourful, garish, sometimes almost like a comic book. Bob especially liked a computer graphic depicting two boys and two girls sitting in front of a dark background around a camp fire reading detective stories. Tension was clearly written in their faces.

Then they sat down around the table and thought about how to proceed. "Perhaps we could camouflage ourselves with the most obvious," Jupiter suggested. "I am Karen's American cousin and you are my friends. This makes us unsuspecting not only for the rest of the people here, but also for the message writer. We can easily talk to her and maybe investigate just as well."

The other two agreed, although they didn't quite see why Jupiter should play the cousin. "After all, I am the First Investigator," Jupe said. Bob didn't want to accept that reasoning.

So it went to 'Rock, Paper, Scissors'. The first player to score three points was the winner. But once again Jupiter was unbeatable. He seemed to be able to predict the thoughts of his partners.

"All right," Bob sighed resignedly. "We have the hotel address. I'll listen around and try to find out where the German team is training. Maybe those at the hotel would know."

Meanwhile Pete and Jupiter wanted to go out and do some important errands. Besides ski lift tickets, passes and trail maps, they also needed drinks and some provisions for the next few days. After all, they were three and a half days away until Sunday's race, and eating out in Vail was expensive. Earlier in the car, the three friends had talked about the menu and quickly agreed on different noodle variants.

When they met again an hour later, everyone achieved what they set out to do. There were enough trail maps, Pete carried in a box of water and bottles of cola and under Jupe's arms were two large bags of food. Bob had found out that the German ski team was training the next day at Peak Elevation, where some difficult slopes were.

After a simple, albeit extensive meal, the three detectives sank exhausted into their sleeping bags.

3. The New Cousin

The next morning, The Three Investigators were up early. The weather was wonderful—the sun was shining from the steel-blue sky that stretched over the bright white snow.

Jupe, Pete and Bob only had a short breakfast. Due to their thirst for action, they hurriedly got their ski gear together and let themselves be pulled up by a quietly humming ski lift to Peak Elevation, at a height of more than 3,500 metres.

Jupiter and Pete had convinced Bob to strap on the skis instead of the snowboard today, as he haven't had that much practice on his board yet. Also for today, they wanted to stay and look around together.

They chose to go on a few easier routes. Even Pete was a little bit restrained to get used to his equipment again. There wasn't much going on at the slopes yet, so the three friends enjoyed their skiing thoroughly. Anyway, one could really live here on the slopes in Vail with its long and varied routes. There was hardly any wind, the sun was shining and the snow conditions were optimal.

It was so fantastic that the three boys were almost disappointed when they soon found the training site of the German ski team. Once again they owe this to Jupe, who had memorized the exact trail map. The training track ran through a forest. Nevertheless, it was possible to get close to the track in some places.

The Three Investigators unbuckled their skis and with their heavy ski boots, took a few steps through the trees to a small plateau. From this position they could overlook exactly one steep bend. After about a minute, a skier appeared like a bolt of lightning, made an extreme bend on her way down.

"Man, that's really fast," Bob cried.

Pete added: "This looks a lot harder and than what we see on TV."

After another minute or two, the next skier appeared. She too was only visible for a few seconds.

"Even Pete still has to practise a bit more," said Jupiter. "If we want to meet Karen Sulzenberger, we'd better go down to the finish area... but not so fast please."

Getting close to Karen was not as difficult as they anticipated. During a training session, the hustle and bustle at the finish area of the track was manageable. There were no reporters, only a few tourists as spectators and some coaches and officials. The Three Investigators leaned against the barrier and waited until Jupiter had located Karen Sulzenberger.

"That's her," said Jupe, pointing to a tall, slender woman who was pulling off her helmet. Underneath came out a cheerful face with blonde short haircut. Karen shook her head free.

An official approached the skier and spoke with her for a few moments. Then she walked towards a tent and briefly stopped not far from The Three Investigators.

"Hello Karen, it's me, Jupiter! Maggie says hello!" Jupiter suddenly called out, leaped over the barrier, ran towards her and hugged her. Karen was so surprised that she didn't even know what happened.

"Maggie Seven sent us," Jupiter whispered to her. "I'll pretend to be your cousin. Please play along and pretend you're happy." Pete noticed that the scene had also attracted the

attention of other observers. One of the officials came up to Karen and Jupiter.

“Who are you? Please stay behind the barrier,” he shouted. Karen explained something in German to him. The coach calmed down a little and said to Jupiter, “Okay, relatives are okay. But now is a practice session. We have strict rules. You can go for lunch later today.” Jupiter triumphantly looked over to Bob and Pete, who gave him envious glances.

Suddenly Pete exclaimed: “Look Bob! Outside that tent! It was one of the two men from the SPEED van! He photographed us with a camera with telephoto lens. And now he’s disappeared.”

Bob shook his head. “I didn’t see him, I was just looking at Karen.”

4. The Meeting with Karen

Karen had suggested a small café for the meeting. It was located in one of the streets in the centre of Vail. The Three Investigators had walked to the town area and then to the café. They were there first and decided on a table at one isolated corner. There wasn't many customers there yet as most should be up in the mountains anyway.

The Three Investigators didn't have to wait long for Karen to arrive. She was wearing a fancy, expensive ski jacket that she had probably received from her outfitter. She took off her sunglasses when she arrived at the table of the three detectives.

"Hi, Jupiter."

"Hi, Karen!"

As she sat down, Jupiter introduced Bob and Pete and Karen shook their hands with a smile. Jupe then presented her with their business card. It said:



"Nice. Maggie told me about you three," Karen said. "It wasn't easy for me to get here. After your performance yesterday, there were some discussions about meeting outsiders. My coaches are a little nervous about the messages, especially when a new one appeared today."

Jupiter raised his eyebrows with interest. "But they didn't object to you meeting a cousin, did they?"

"I managed to convince them," Karen replied, "But I cannot stay too long."

"I'm sorry about that earlier," Jupiter apologized. "It was really a little stormy. I only realized afterwards that it had attracted a lot of attention."

"Yes," Karen interrupted him. "Now everyone has seen how easy it is to get to me, especially if someone wants to harm me. In just one second, the message writer could come up to me. That pretty much scares me."

"In a way, everyone will be more careful now," Jupiter tried to get something good out of it. "And we're here to help you too."

Although she was a star in the ski scene, she behaved very naturally—really a nice girl, Jupiter found. He estimated that she was about three, four years older than he was.

The Three Investigators had prepared some questions for Karen the night before and Jupiter wanted to know if she would mind answering them for a few minutes.

"No, of course not."

Bob explained that he wanted to take some notes.

"So today a new message came," Jupiter began. "Can I see all the messages?"

Karen pulled three envelopes out of her jacket. On each of them was written with a black felt pen in block letters: 'FOR KAREN'. Nothing else was suspicious about the envelopes. Each envelope contained a simple sheet of paper, also written on with a felt-tip pen. The messages were very short and actually seemed harmless.

The first message was: 'Trust no one'. The second: 'You will lose soon'. The latest message was: 'Eyes on the slope'.

"Do these statements have a hidden meaning for you, say, a special meaning," Jupiter asked.

"No, they tell me as much as they tell you. And they're all written in English."

"It could also be a person from some other country who just wants to camouflage himself with English," Bob surmised.

"Or maybe not," Pete threw in.

"And how were the messages delivered?" Jupiter asked.

"To my hotel room so far. They were slipped under my door. I found two of them in the morning after getting up. My room mate found the other one."

"Room mate?" interrupted Pete.

"Yes. Throughout the season, we stay in double rooms. There are always two women in the same room. However, some other skiers do change room mates from time to time, but not for me. I always share my room with Nicola."

"Nicola Schalla?" Of course, Jupiter knew again.

"Yes," Karen replied.

"Another famous skier," Jupiter continued. "But why don't you change room mates like the others?"

"We get along very well," Karen replied. "It is also a small reward for our achievements. Nicola also skis very well—at least so far. But she had some problems for a few weeks now."

Jupiter knew more about this too. "She competes with you in downhill skiing, although her strengths are in the giant slalom and super-G." Karen nodded.

Bob took some notes. "What's super-G?" he wanted to know.

Karen briefly explained the disciplines in skiing—downhill, super-G, giant slalom, slalom. "To put it simply, there are fewest gates to ski through in downhill. Gradually there are more and more gates up to slalom. Therefore downhill skiing is a very straight-forward event with an emphasis on speed. Super-G is still quite fast, but requires more turns with the extra gates."

"So slalom is then the slowest by comparison," Bob added superfluously. Pete rolled his eyes, so Bob had understood it too.

"And although Nicola is your competitor, you get along well with her?" Jupiter asked.

"Yes," the answer came a little hesitantly. "Yes, of course."

Jupiter registered the hesitation, but ignored it and changed back to the messages again. "When did you receive the first message? Have you been getting such messages at every place you've competed lately?"

"The first two messages came during the race in Switzerland last month, the third came today," Karen said. "Yeah, that's just what worries me. The message writer seems to be following me along."

"Karen..." Bob said. "How do you actually react to this kind of messages? I mean, the messages themselves sound harmless at first. What are they doing to you?"

Bob noticed Karen putting a hand on her neck, a gesture of insecurity. He had touched a sore spot with his question.

“Well,” Karen replied, “How should I describe it... I’m confused and a little irritated. Of course, they sound harmless at first. But they are such strange messages. Actually, I’m not afraid, otherwise I wouldn’t be a downhill racer. We have to learn to be calm and overcome our fears. If we want to be at the forefront, we have to stay cool and at the same time push ourselves to the limit. A small mistake could result in a serious fall—and even death.”

Bob looked at her and continued to listen calmly. Karen had meanwhile taken her hand down. She also spoke more confidently and openly revealed her position. “As I need such intense concentration, little things are enough to put me out of my rhythm. I can lose focus and make mistakes. And this usually leads to further mistakes. It’s like a vicious circle. My performance can get weaker. In addition, the press asks questions and puts pressure on us. That’s why I’m trying to stay away from them. The coaches and trainers do react prudently and want to radiate calmness. But of course they’re getting more nervous too. They too are under pressure to succeed.”

“And these messages are such trivial things that bother you,” Bob concluded. “So there has to be some motive. Perhaps someone is trying to get you off the track to success with simple means. After all, you’re one of the favourites for the ski championships.”

“So far, I have everything under control,” Karen said. “I’m aiming for a second or third place in the downhill race, and I’m quite okay with the other disciplines, so overall, I’m still happy. The training runs here were good so far.”

“Of course, there is still uncertainty as to how this will develop,” Bob said. “So far, as I see, the messages seem to be warnings rather than threats. But what happens if the message writer doesn’t achieve what he set out to do? Would he resort to tougher measures like threats?”

Karen nervously turned her coffee cup between her fingers. “Of course, that’s a good question—what else could happen? What would the creepy message writer think of?”

She looked around restlessly. Her gaze remained fixed on Jupiter, who looked into her eyes calmly—a little too long, Bob thought.

No doubt, Jupiter thought Karen was great—which was understandable. Just as Bob was about to say something to calm the situation, Jupiter found himself back in his detective role. He came up with the next question: “Who could be interested in your failure?”

“The competitors,” Pete burst in between. “I suppose it happens in all competitive sports.”

“Of course, there’s a lot of jealousy,” Karen replied, “but I don’t believe anyone would resort to such methods to unsettle me.”

“It could also come from the environment—coaches, trainers, fans, husbands, friends,” said Jupiter.

“Coaches and trainers are here, of course, but I can’t imagine that they have anything to do with it. The husbands and friends don’t actually travel with us,” Karen said. “I try to notice anyone suspicious in all the places I go to, but in such large ski resorts, anyone can move around inconspicuously.”

“Who’s part of your team?” Bob wanted to know.

Karen counted: “One head coach, two assistant coaches, one trainer each for the technical disciplines—slalom, giant slalom, and downhill skiing. Then there are two physiotherapists to ensure that we are also psychologically and physically adjusted. Of course, there are the skiers in the team. So that’s twelve of us. And finally, from every ski company, one or two service technicians to keep the skis and equipment in order.”

“A lot of people,” Bob said. “So every skier has her own ski company and thus her own service technician?”

“Of course. The ski companies are in competition with each other. That’s why every company sends their own people to handle their equipment.”

Jupiter continued in this direction: “This point could be quite important. After all, there is always a lot of money involved in sports. Also, you skiers also provide important advertisement for the respective ski company. Success in the ski championships is expected to generate good sales among the many recreational athletes. What brand do you use?”

“ZACK, a European brand,” Karen said. “I’m really very happy with it.”

“And what about the other skiers?” Pete asked.

“The usual big brands—V5, Downhill, SPEED...” Karen replied.

“SPEED,” Bob mumbled and then louder, “Who’s using SPEED?”

“Uh... If I can recall... Amanda James from Canada, Anneliese Lutz from Switzerland, Petra Hofer from Austria, and then Nicola, my room mate,” Karen said as Bob furiously jotted the information down.

“Why did you ask about SPEED of all brands?” Karen wanted to know.

Pete took the floor and played down the incident on the way here. “A SPEED van drove up the mountains in front of us yesterday. Nothing special, really. We saw the two men in the van and remembered the company.”

“That’s not unusual,” Karen said. “All the major companies are here to accompany their skiers. ZACK is also here. SPEED even has a test track here.”

Bob took a look around the café. Perhaps they might have someone observing them as they did at the training site earlier. In the meantime a few more customers came into the café, but nobody seemed to take notice of them.

Jupiter summarized: “So we have a lot of possible suspects—skiers, coaches, trainers, husbands, friends, company employees... We should also think of a madman who just wants to make himself important. So it’s not easy!”

“We’ll definitely take a look around,” said Pete. “If we stay close to you, it might have another advantage—you can teach us how to ski!”

“Sure, if I have the time.” Finally, Karen laughed. “I’m not on holiday here, as I’m supposed to win one or two races. By the way, you look sporty, so I believe you can certainly ski!”

Pete was happy about the compliment and wanted to get up.

But Jupiter continued on with another question. “Back to an earlier point in our conversation—do you have a boyfriend?”

Bob and Pete looked at him sharply. Not only that Jupiter was visibly impressed by Karen, now this was also a personal question. What did he think Lys would say about that?

But Karen smiled. “I had a boyfriend once, but now I’m free, if that’s what you want to know. But remember, you’re my cousin! And besides, as a professional skier, I don’t have time for friends anyway...”

Jupiter got red-faced. “No, no. A purely criminological question,” he said. “After all, there are supposed to be jealous friends...”

“And jealous girlfriends,” Bob thought.

For Pete, the matter was over. “We shouldn’t be taking up more of your time,” he suggested.

Bob nodded and looked around the café again. Although he again didn’t notice anything suspicious, he had oppressive feelings that they were being watched.

5. Pete Takes a Risk

The Three Investigators left the café together with Karen. She made her way back to her hotel by bus. While walking back to their apartment, the three discussed the next steps and decided to spend the afternoon separately so as to cover more activities there.

Karen had told them that a timed practice was to take place in the afternoon. Jupiter decided to go to the starting area of the training to take a closer look at Nicola. After all, she was not only the room mate but also a fierce competitor of Karen. She had her own problems and she used SPEED equipment. He also wanted to find out whether the two friendly gentlemen from the SPEED van were her service technicians. As a room mate, Nicola also had the best opportunity to place the messages unobserved under the door or even to find them herself. It was definitely worth investigating.

Bob couldn't resist a little teasing: "And Karen's there too, Juve. You can ask her more criminological questions again."

Jupiter elbowed him rudely in the ribs. "We've interviewed Karen enough. But maybe I can get to know some of the other skiers. Because the skiers of other countries will also take part in this afternoon's timed practice."

"Well, then say hello to Picabo for me," grinned Pete. He wanted to take care of SPEED himself. There were enormous competitive pressure among the ski companies. Perhaps he could find out whether the two SPEED employees were really only transporting ski equipment or whether they had something to hide.

"Be careful," Jupiter warned the Second Investigator. "Don't take too many risks."

Bob had supposedly the best job. He was finally allowed the chance to practise his snowboarding. However, he was to stay close to the training track and keep an eye on it. Maybe he might spot a mysterious madman. Karen had given The Three Investigators a practice schedule so Bob could check which skier was on.

Karen had told them that at the Sonnenalp Hotel, where the German team was staying, the authorities wanted to organize a round-the-clock security service to monitor the hotel wing where her room was located.

"But maybe tonight we'll still keep an eye on the Sonnenalp," said Jupiter. "Better safe than sorry."

Bob nodded. "Besides, we can't disappoint Mrs Seven. She expects good work from us."

In the early evening they planned to meet again in their apartment and discuss their findings.

Pete first decided to go to the Sun Park Hotel where the SPEED technicians stayed. From the bus he could see their van parked there.

A few minutes later, Pete stood at the reception of the hotel. A nice receptionist approached him. Pete decided to improvise and claimed to be one of SPEED's youth test skiers. "Unfortunately, I arrived too late. Can you tell me where the others are?" Pete put on his friendliest smile. He didn't even know if there were any youth test skiers at all. Fortunately, the woman at the reception had no clue either. She believed his story immediately. However, the receptionist was more helpful than Pete would have liked. She

picked up the phone and wanted to inform the SPEED technicians that they could come to meet their test skier.

“That’s very kind of you.” Pete looked deep into the eyes of the receptionist. “But you’d help me more if you didn’t call them. Uh, you know, I don’t want to give the technicians any trouble. They’re always very irritable anyway.” In the eyes of the receptionist, Pete read that she didn’t think the two men were the nicest either. “I’ll find my way if you’d just tell me where SPEED trains,” he continued.

“Yes,” said the receptionist and smiled at Pete. “I hope you don’t get too much trouble. Look here.” She pulled out a trail map and explained to Pete exactly where the SPEED people were in the mountains. He learned that the technicians had secured a small remote mountain cabin for their equipment and tests. Pete marked out the place as accurate as possible on his ski map.

“Thank you for your help,” he said, smiling nicely and then he left the hotel.

He decided to stop by the apartment for a moment. To be on the safe side, the other two detectives should be told exactly where he intended to go. Pete quickly drew on a piece of paper the location of the mountain cabin, wrote ‘SPEED cabin’ next to it and put the paper into the painter’s mailbox. Then he took out a blue chalk and drew a question mark on the outside flap of the mailbox. It was an old and well-proven identification mark of The Three Investigators. They have three chalk colours—white for Jupe, blue for Pete, and green for Bob.

The cabin used by SPEED was not at the front of Peak Elevation, but slightly to the back of the mountain. Not far from it was the famous Back Bowls, one of the more difficult slopes of the whole area. Pete was looking forward to the challenge, as he had already heard a lot about Back Bowls. But he still felt a slight tingling sensation in the stomach area. After all, he was alone and had to ski very carefully so that he would not crash.

With the high-speed ski lifts, it didn’t take Pete long to reach the summit of the extensive ski area. Then he oriented himself further into the mountains. From lift to lift he noticed how the more inexperienced skiers stayed away and it became emptier and emptier. The descents seemed less troublesome to Pete than he had anticipated, although they were really difficult. Many places were very narrow and steep, and partly not even prepared by the snow groomers. But Pete was a very good skier.

Pete had to let himself be pulled up again by two ski lifts, then he was on the track from which one could get to the cabin. If he didn’t pay attention, he’d overlooked the spot easily, but Pete went down very slowly. He immediately noticed the ski tracks in the snow that came off the slope and disappeared behind a small hill in the forest. With an elegant brake swing, Pete came to a standstill on the hill. The tracks ran into the forest. The cabin was barely visible between the trees. At the edge of the forest a rope was stretched across to which several notices were attached, all with the message: ‘Private Property! No Trespassing!’

If Pete chose this path and someone discovered him, it would immediately be clear that he had approached the cabin intentionally. Pete slipped back to the track and skied down to the lower ski lift station. He wanted to take the ski lift again, this time further up from the track.

A small forest path at the edge of the track seemed suitable for him. Pete waited until the other skiers went past him so he could glide unseen into the forest. He didn’t want to take any chances. Only slowly did he move forward in deep snow. When he had made about half the distance, suddenly a tree, a big rock and a broken branch appeared in front of him at the same time. Pete reacted too late and landed in the snow. His skis came loose.

"Maybe it's all right," Pete murmured, climbed up and put his skis on his shoulder. With his heavy boots, he stomped further through the denser forest until he could see the cabin between the trees. It wasn't far. Pete stopped for a moment and looked around. He didn't notice anything unusual. It was quiet. Still, he wanted to be careful.

He decided to approach the cabin from below. From there, unfriendly residents, if any, would not expect any visitors. But he had to go a long way round.

After a while, he crossed the access road. The skis gradually became too heavy for him and Pete hid them behind a stack of wood. As he approached the back of the cabin, he saw that there was a hidden track leading downhill. It was probably the test track.

The cabin had only two windows at the back and no other door. Pete noticed some tracks in the snow that led around the house. Among them were also the prints of an animal, presumably of a dog. It was all the more a reason for him to be careful. Carefully Pete moved towards the cabin. He was cowering under one of the windows.

Then he heard the voices of two men. Pete thought he recognized one of them. That must have been the bearded man who told him off unkindly on the way here.

"We're going to have to make a success out of this, else ZACK will once again be the big winner at the end of the season. To me, that would stink. You understand that too, Patrick?"

"Yes, our boss wants success. Nicola and Petra simply have to come out stronger," replied the man named Patrick, probably the smaller unshaven man. "Even Anneliese, if only she didn't have other things on her mind all the time. Well, to the media, they all don't come across as good as Karen. Petra is close. Unfortunately, we couldn't poach Karen. She would have increased our popularity."

So it was all about money to ensure success for the various ski brands. A most enlightening conversation, Pete found. And it was pretty easy to understand from out there too.

"As nice as Karen may be, she really is a tough cookie," the bearded man said. "You can't even lure her with money. But now the blond is on her..."

Pete moved closer to the wall. The conversation was getting more interesting.

"Oh, the blond, yeah," Patrick said. "I wonder if he really could even help us."

"Let him try!" the bearded one said. "Tonight I will be meeting him to find out more."

A chair was moved. Then Patrick spoke again: "The pressure to succeed is incredibly great. The plan is to give our skiers the new skis and enough time for them to gain the necessary experience before the Winter Olympics. Then we will introduce the skis to the public shortly before the event. By that time, it will be far too late for our competitors to react. We'll make real money and sweep our rivals off the market. And next year, my friend, more skiers would be joining us in droves—including Karen Sulzenberger. She, too, will need top equipment."

Then Patrick said: "The only thing that annoys me is that the new ski is not working properly yet. It is just too unstable on the straight. The skiers will be afraid to take it to the limit in a race. Nicola should be able to cope with it most of all because of her way she skis. We should build her up even if she might not market it so well."

"Yes, let her try the new ski now," the bearded man replied in his unfriendly harsh tone. "How about the next training? We'll tell her that the ski is fine. The vibrations are completely normal. Nothing's gonna happen."

"But it hasn't been properly tested yet," Patrick said. "Isn't the risk much too great? If there's an accident, and if it comes out that the ski was to be blamed, we'd be in trouble."

"Even if something happens, we can still avoid the consequences," the bearded one said. "We'll just blame it on Nicola, or a technical error. We'll figure it out then."

Pete couldn't believe his ears. He had to warn Nicola about the new skis. He straightened up a little.

Suddenly a dog growl was heard. So Pete wasn't wrong. Those were dog tracks in the snow. He felt hot and cold. He had barely made a sound. Did the dog hear something?

"Hold still," he suddenly heard the bearded man hiss. "I think there's some sound outside. Probably someone's snooping around!"

Chairs was dragged on the floor, and the men stood up. The door on the other side of the house opened. "Go, Truck, go!"

Pete heard the dog coming out. He waited, tensed. But the dog didn't come to him. He apparently ran up the slope. Loud barking followed, then an outcry: "Hey, get the dog away! Hey!"

Pete pulled a small pocket mirror out of his pocket and carefully held it near the ground around the corner of the cabin. This gave him an overview of the situation—a medium-sized dog had went after a skier who had rode down the forbidden path. And not only did the dog chased, he apparently even bit the skier. Anyway, the man had one arm raised.

But the SPEED men took a while to call the dog back. Then they ordered the man into the cabin. He followed them with a pain distorted face.

Fortunately he did not take that forbidden path, Pete thought. He then took up his former position again. Now it's definitely going to be exciting in there.

6. Jupiter has Suspicions

After he had said goodbye to Pete and Bob, the First Investigator hurried back to the slopes. He made his way up to the training site of the German ski team.

Jupiter was particularly looking forward to the quick reunion with Karen, who impressed him more than he really wanted—especially when he thought of Lys sitting at home now. On the other hand, Lys surely wasn't sitting behind her books all the time, but was probably hanging around at one or the other wild party. At least that's how Jupe imagined it. So, he thought he could quietly rave about his cousin, even though she wasn't a real one.

With a few particularly elegant swings, Jupiter wanted to ski into the starting area of the women's training session. After all, he was the First Investigator and he was—even if only in the eyes of the others—the cousin of a famous skier.

But first, two guards stopped him. They stood at the entrance to the starting area and waved him away like two highway cops. One of the guards explained to him that outsiders were not allowed into the training site, but he could hang around outside the barriers.

Jupiter was fine with that. A while later, he saw Karen coming out of the tent. Jupiter waved to her. She then broke away from the group she was in and approached him. "I see that you have your skis. We've got to go to the coach for a team meeting. It may take half an hour or so. Soon, we will have our training, so see you later."

Jupiter nodded and smiled, but what else could he do?

Karen's good mood seemed a little artificial. Jupe could tell that the messages seemed to get to her. Together with the other German skiers, she disappeared into another tent set up especially for their training. Jupiter continued to look around.

He quickly recognized the Austrians and Swiss by their ski suits. They seemed to be in the best of moods, exuberant, even between skiers of different nations. Of course, they had known each other for a very long time. Jupiter recognized among them was Anneliese Lutz from Switzerland and Petra Hofer from Austria. They spoke animatedly with each other.

At a short distance away, there was a wooden table in front of another tent next to the barrier. The two men sitting there looked as if they were from a television station. Large bags and cases, as those used for cameras, stood around them. The two of them drank coffee and talked.

Jupiter decided to see whether he could have a chat with them. He knew he could always learn something from media people. He walked a long way round the barrier towards the tent.

It turned out that the two men were German journalists who accompanied the German team for almost the entire winter season. They were an editor named Harry Langbinder and a cameraman who introduced himself as Franz Bierbichler. Jupiter preferred not to tell his cousin story, otherwise the journalists would surely have asked him about Karen, involved him in contradictions and possibly found out via archives or research that none of what he would have said was true. So he simply said that he was a ski fan.

The editor worked for a major television company. Although he complained a little about the constant pressure to make contributions, overall he made a very good impression. He was a ski freak and soon they reached the topic that interested Jupiter most—the relationship between Karen Sulzenberger and Nicola Schalla.

“You Europeans and especially you Germans really have good skiers,” Jupe began to butter up Harry Langbinder to make him talk. “Our Picabo has no chance, even if I enjoy watching her so much and she is such a nice person,” he heard himself say. “Even here on home ground, she won’t win.”

Langbinder agreed with him, although he graciously admitted that Picabo was a very good skier.

“We like Karen a lot,” Bierbichler threw in. “All we have to do is keep the camera on her, and people are thrilled. She is an incredibly lively, funny and photogenic person. The advertising companies are tearing themselves apart to get to her.”

“Quite unlike Nicola,” added Harry Langbinder. “She’s completely locked up when a camera is on her. You can’t get anything out of her. Every interview is a torture. She basically only says yes or no. I usually cannot think of any more questions. With Karen, all I have to do is hold a mic to her and she can sell anything.” He looked thoughtfully at his coffee cup.

“It’s a pity she has less and less time,” Langbinder continued. “The hype around her is getting more and more. Previously, we used to sit together in the evenings and celebrate successes and failures with Swiss, Austrian, French or Californian wine—depending on where the races took place.”

“That’s right, we emptied a glass or two,” Bierbichler happily added. “Although the girls always stay with the non-alcoholic drinks. It’s a lot healthier, isn’t it, Harry?”

The conversation threatened to take a different turn, so Jupiter had to steer them back. “If Karen and Nicola are so different, why do they always share the same room? Do they get along when they’re so different?”

“Well, it’s not that clear.” It was Langbinder talking again. “There are occasional rumours of disputes. Of course we have our contacts with all the skiers and coaches, but they don’t really let us know too much.”

Bierbichler sipped on his cup even though it was already empty. He looked around. “The team meeting’s over,” he shouted suddenly. “Come on, Harry, let’s see what’s new.”

Langbinder and Bierbichler stood up. “*Auf Wiedersehen!*” they said and nodded to Jupiter. “Duty calls. Have a good time.”

The journalists picked out the head coach. Karen stepped out of the tent together with Nicola. The two went up to the barrier where Jupiter was and Karen introduced him as her American cousin. Ah, he thought, so the friendship isn’t that great. She didn’t tell Nicola about The Three Investigators’ real mission there. Apparently, no one else knows, so that’s good.

Only a short while later, a man approached them and called Nicola aside to speak with her, ignoring the other two. Nicola then told the two that she need to attend to something and went with the man in the direction of the refreshment tent.

Karen turned to Jupe and said softly: “That’s her SPEED service technician, Karl. I told you earlier that we have technicians who keep our skis in order.” Jupiter nodded. He also noted that that Karl wasn’t one of the two from the van. Probably the two could be working in the background, he thought.

“Over there,” Karen pointed to another man, “is my service technician, Jürgen. Obviously he’s from ZACK.”

The timed practice should begin shortly. Since it was Karen’s turn right after some Austrians, she wanted to relax. “I have to go over to the physiotherapist for the final relaxation,” Karen said to Jupiter. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

Jupiter continued to look around the starting area, at the competitors, officials, and the spectators.

About ten minutes later, he heard some commotion at the German tent. One of the officials shouted something in German to the head coach.

Jupiter went along the barrier close to the commotion to see whether he could pick up on the conversation. Langbinder and Bierbichler were also there.

The head coach was now speaking to an American organizing official. "Some stranger was in the tent. The copy of the start list has been stolen!" The coach then said that his assistant had put a copy of the start list in his sports bag late in the morning. Now he found the sports bag opened and the list disappeared. Nothing else was missing.

"Strange," Jupiter murmured. It worked feverishly in him. What could that mean? The tent wasn't very secure. In an unobserved moment, anyone could have gone in there, but he hadn't noticed anything himself.

Slowly people dispersed again. Even the journalists left. The missing copy of a start list for a training session probably wasn't too serious.

Jupiter then looked over to the start gate and saw Karen there. The start list, he thought, who would have an interest in it? Who would steal a start list? And for what?

And for Karen—was there a connection? The latest message she received was: 'Eyes on the slope'. As if two power lines were touching, the realization of the possible connection suddenly went through him. Instinctively, he ran along the barrier towards the start gate.

But Karen was already on her way.

7. A Boy Named Toni

Bob was looking forward to his assignment. After he had separated from Jupe and Pete, he ran quickly to the apartment. In no time he put on his snowboarding clothes. He had borrowed a casual long snow jacket, wide trousers and special gloves from a friend at school.

It was common for snowboarders to look relaxed, as if they were above all things. That was one aspect of snowboarding that Bob liked—creating his own style, setting himself apart from the familiar, finding people with similar interests.

Snowboarding could be much more social than skiing. One could sit with friends in the snow and showed each other new techniques and jumps. What Bob didn't like so much was that snowboarding had become a huge business as with many sports. But it was fun anyway. Pete could say whatever he wanted.

With his simple all-round board under his arm, which was just right for a not-yet-very-experienced snowboarder, he set off. With that, The Three Investigators were in full operation.

The wonderful landscape and the great weather Bob enjoyed from the ski lift brought him more and more into the mood. Once at the top, he stopped at a suitable spot and looked at the panorama and the valley in front of him. Bob wanted to enjoy the scenery for at least a moment. He always had an eye for impressive natural landscapes. A little further down, a group of snowboarders sat in the snow watching one of their friends perform jumping tricks.

Bob took out the ski plan from his jacket. From there he could see the starting area at some distance away. His plan was to position himself at a point along the training track further down from the starting area. For this, he had to go up and down a few slopes and ski lifts to get there. Then he set off. First he tried to warm up using the scooting technique and pushed himself off with one leg.

But soon he got on the board with both legs, he switched to a few faster drift turns. It went fantastically, although the slope was not easy. The snow was neither too soft nor too hard. Just as he was getting the board to glide correctly, he ended up on a small hill. Bob turned in the air and landed sideways, slipped further and suddenly stopped. Someone fell over him.

"Hello," shouted a bright voice. "Do you always brake with this amazing technique?"

Bob turned around and saw a boy of around his age. He beamed at him cheerfully. He looked a bit cheeky with his short reddish hair, snub nose and many freckles. He also had a slight accent that Bob couldn't identify then.

"Hi," Bob said, still pretty speechless.

"Let's sort ourselves out first," suggested the boy.

As it turned out, the boy was called Toni and came from Vienna in Austria. He was here with his parents, whose dream had always been to ski in the US. And Toni was allowed to come with them. Actually he felt bored in Vail, because he was alone with his snowboard and his friends were all on holiday in Europe. However, he was enthusiastic about the mountains.

"A fantastic landscape, great dry cool air and everything is so easy." Toni told Bob that in Europe the ski resorts were much smaller, and the queues for the ski lifts were much longer. "And the service staff are so friendly here."

Bob was surprised that in Europe skiers and snowboarders used the same slopes and not on separate slopes as in the US. He liked to hear Tony's compliments about the US, but they were not as self-evident to him as they had been before. As The Three Investigators had been to Europe, he knew that it was incredibly beautiful elsewhere in the world. Bob told Toni about the places they had been in Europe and raved to him about the good ice cream at Tichys in Vienna.

"What? You were in my home-city? And for once, the sun even shone? Great! But by the way, I prefer the ice cream at Schwedenplatz. It's not so sweet, but it's much creamier. But you Americans have a sweet tooth..." Toni grinned at him.

Bob grinned at the little teasing and their conversation then went on to snowboarding, snow sports in general, and of course, the big race on Sunday. Toni said that his family were also here for the event. Bob then told Toni that he was there with two of his friends.

It seemed to Bob as if he had known Toni for a long time, like a good friend. He just trusted him. However, he decided to be cautious and not reveal that they were detectives on an assignment. This was especially so when the investigators still do not have any suspects in mind.

Bob then went with the story that Jupiter was Karen's American cousin. Then he raved about Karen, but he hadn't realize the extent of the German-Austrian rivalry, so Toni interrupted him immediately.

"Karen Sulzenberger may be quite nice, but compared to Austria's Petra Hofer, she simply lacks the elegance!" Toni added one more thing: "We have much higher Alps than the Germans anyway."

Bob grinned about the emerging competition between the European countries and wanted to say something. But suddenly he realized that they had been talking for quite a while. He wasn't actually here to do that. It was time to go to the training track. Toni wanted to come with him and Bob didn't mind at all.

On the way down Toni showed him some snowboarding techniques and jumps. Bob didn't have the time to try them out in the first place. Toni was really good on his board—much better than himself.

"You must have been practising in secret," Bob joked.

"This is the fourth winter I've been snowboarding," Toni said proudly. "Funny, the snowboard comes from the US, and now I can still teach you something."

Finally they reached a point from which they could see the sharp bend of the training track. They positioned close to the inside of a bend a distance away from the protective barrier. The small plateau in the forest which they had reached yesterday, lay diagonally below them.

The training had already started. One skier was racing down the track. She skied through the bend and then passed the marshal, who stood at the end of the bend. He was equipped with a mobile phone. If there was an accident, he could immediately call for help and stop the race via his mobile phone.

Bob took out the start list from his pocket and looked for the number of the skier who had just disappeared from his field of vision. But Toni was faster. "That was Petra Hofer, Austria's top female skier!"

Bob found her on his list. She was followed by two more skiers from Austria, then it was Karen Sulzenberger's turn. So he wasn't too late. Bob was watching the surroundings as well. At first, he didn't notice anything special. In the meantime more snowboarders had sat down in the snow next to Bob and Toni. They also watched the skiers and commented on what was happening.

Although they didn't think much of skiing, they were impressed by the speed and the skills exhibited. From their position, the spectators had a very good view of the approach to the bend and could observe the preparations of the skiers for the approaching change of direction. The athletes had to have inspected and tested the track beforehand, as the bend could not be seen from the track. At the same time, they had to get the most out of the speed to be among the fastest racers. Karen had said that she knew the track very well and she could almost handle the bend with her eyes closed.

The last Austrian skier who just passed by, according to the list, was Lisa Immerwahr. "Lisa is also very good," said Toni, who apparently knew all the skiers from Austria well. "Just had a little bad luck lately."

The next skier had to be Karen Sulzenberger. Bob and Toni looked eagerly and expectantly at the approach to the bend. Surely Karen could not be any slower than the previous racers. Bob hoped that the messages didn't get to her too hard, and she's got it all under control.

Suddenly Bob noticed in the corner of his eye a dark shadow opposite, at the edge of the forest where they were yesterday. Bob took a closer look. Toni also seemed to have noticed something. They saw a man in a dark red and black ski suit balancing a long heavy branch over the protective barrier. The branch slipped down onto the track and came to rest in the middle of it. Bob screamed. In a few moments, Karen would come racing down at enormous speed. She wouldn't be able to see the obstacle until the very last moment. It was a nasty, perhaps deadly trap! The skier had no chance to avoid in time! The obstacle was also out of the view of the marshal.

Bob panicked and looked at the obstacle and immediately back to the edge of the forest. The man had gone, disappeared in the woods. There's no point in chasing him. It was too dangerous for them to get to the track now and the marshal was too far away. He screamed helplessly, "Stop! Karen, stop!" But at the same time he knew that of course she couldn't hear him. He then waved and shouted at the marshal but he was focussing on the skier coming down.

Toni had also grasped the danger and looked at Bob in horror, because in a very short moment, Karen would appear!

8. Shock in the Snow

Karen sped through the snow like a bullet. Bob, Toni and the other snowboarders stared in horror at the obstacle. They could do nothing, except jumped up, shouted and waved desperately.

Although everything went very fast, Bob saw the scene as if in slow motion. Karen crouched low and prepared for the bend. She shifted the left ski slightly outwards, without taking the pressure completely from the inner ski, in order not to lose too much speed. There were the scratching noise of the cutting edges in hard snow. Clearly Karen made her way down. Now she had passed about a third of the bend. And only then did she see the obstacle.

Karen reacted like lightning. She took the pressure from the edges, so that she shot straight ahead, directly towards the safety net. Then she tried to brake and grazed the branch with her right ski. The ski boot received a blow, the binding came loose and the right ski flew through the air. For a short time Karen stood only on her left leg, she turned, whirled around and landed in the safety net.

Bob and Toni were horrified to see the skier lying on the ground. It was hard to imagine what had happened to her. For a few moments she laid motionless. Then the marshal appeared, his mobile phone in his hand. He leaned over Karen, gave her a hand, and...

Karen stood up. Miraculously, but even more through her reaction, she seemed to have survived the accident unharmed.

"Whew," Bob sighed. Toni gave him a pat on the back and the snowboarders clapped.

"Come, let's go nearer to her," Bob said to Toni. "The marshal must have interrupted the training immediately."

Karen was still standing at the same spot, leaning forward with her legs stretched out, as if to relax. Then she straightened up again and moved her arms. She looked around her to see if everything was still all right. Bob and Toni cautiously approached the barrier nearest to her. Bob clearly noticed that Karen was trembling all over.

The shock was still on her face. The marshal stood next to her. He reminded Bob a little of a good friend—a somewhat older man, rather full stature, a large bald head, drooping cheeks and eyelids, not unlike a cocker spaniel. He could pass for Alfred Hitchcock's brother. He looked at the two new arrivals closely.

"Who are you?" the bald man asked Bob.

"That's Bob, my friend, it's okay," Karen mumbled and even smiled a little again. "I've never made such a crazy flight before.

"Are you okay?" Bob asked.

"I think I'm all right," Karen said and looked at the net hanging limply from its mount. "Sorry I damaged the net."

Bob found that Karen wasn't so easily beaten down. The skier still trembled a bit. The marshal then turned to Bob and Toni and asked: "Did you see who put the branch on the track?"

"One person in a dark red and black ski suit," Bob replied. "But I couldn't see the face of that devilish guy. The ski goggles covered his face."

That's all Bob had seen of the man. Even his size was difficult to estimate. He had looked like a devil in his dark red and black ski suit—a devil skier—as Bob would call him.

A rescue helicopter came closer and circled briefly. The marshal spoke something on his mobile phone. Then the helicopter left. Luckily, it wasn't needed. Only then the coaches and officials from the German team came down the track. There were also some racers among them. The incident must have spread like wildfire. The coach ignored Bob, went to Karen and hugged her, "What exactly happened? How did this branch get here?"

Bob and Toni, who were on the other side of the barrier, stepped back a bit. There they saw Jupiter coming down the slope along the outside of the barriers in an almost tortoise-like manner compared to the racers. However, in view of the steepness of the slope, it was a credible performance from him. Jupiter came to a stop, puffed and said to Bob: "What happened?"

"Hi, Jupe," Bob said and calmly gave him a short report of the incident, especially the last minutes leading to Karen's accident. Bob then introduced Toni and Jupiter to each other. "This is Jupiter, one of my two friends! And this is Toni from Vienna. We met earlier."

Bob suggested searching the area where he saw the devil skier earlier as it may be possible to get some clues before the police arrived. It was no longer a matter of a few threatening messages that could be seen as a joke. Now the perpetrator had shown his dangerous face.

While the attention of the crowd was on the accident scene, the three inconspicuously walked along the barrier and up the slope. Bob and Toni led the way. When they were approaching the spot, Jupiter held Bob and Toni back so they wouldn't cover the tracks and interfere with police work. Therefore, they had to check the area out at a distance away. Even then, they could see traces of the dragged branch in the snow.

It was clear that the place had been chosen very carefully by the devil skier because the barrier was a little lower than the plateau, so that it was not so difficult to lift the branch above it. Also ski tracks were seen on the plateau and the escape route was clearly visible. The devil skier had to be quite a good skier, because he had been able to disappear through the trees so quickly.

"I don't know if it's important," Toni said, pointing in the direction of the escape, "but there's a glove hanging from the bush over there."

Jupiter pulled his camera out of the ski anorak and took a few pictures of the glove. Surely it was safe as long as they did not touch the glove.

Jupe, Bob and Toni went back to the accident site and saw that more personnel had reached there, including medical staff. Some snowmobiles were also seen. Then Jupiter decided that since Karen was in good hands now, they should make their way to the finish area to have a look around and wait for her.

Bob then pulled Jupiter aside to have a word with him. "Jupe," he said. "I haven't told Toni that we are investigating for Karen. I'd just want to be careful whom we speak to especially when we don't have clear leads so far. However, I think we should tell him."

"I suppose it is okay to do that, but we still have to be careful what we say," Jupiter said. "Anybody could be a suspect at this moment."

"I have this feeling that Toni is okay," Bob said. "I surely don't mind that he tags along with me. I may need a companion especially we may be short-handed." Jupe agreed.

Jupiter went back to the starting area to get his skis and would rejoin the two at the finish area. Bob and Toni then made their way down slowly on their snowboards.

"So then you're detectives!" Toni remarked. "That sounds really exciting. And you are on a case now, is it?"

Bob then told him about their current investigation, the threatening messages that started it all, about Pete, and that Karen was not really Jupe's cousin. Toni was impressed and told Bob that he would help if asked.

By the time Bob and Toni reached the finish area, some journalists were already waiting for the skiers to return. The news of the unfortunate accident had spread around and was of course a topic for the media. The other guests of Vail were also worried. There had never been anything such as this before, so that generated exciting discussions among them.

Officials and the police cordoned off the area to prevent the crowd from getting too near. Bob and Toni stayed some distance back and kept an eye on the situation, especially for suspicious characters who may be looming around.

Fifteen minutes later, Jupe rejoined Bob and Toni.

Jupiter was angry at himself. "I was so close! The messages to Karen, a stolen start list! A stranger was interested in the order of the starters. I wonder why. He just wanted to know when Karen was racing. And why would he want to know that? He needed the list to be able to stop her! Just think of the last message—'Eyes on the slope'—it was a warning to her to watch out on the slope!

"When I realized that, Karen had just left the start gate. A short time later, the officials got the call from the marshal. There was a hectic rush, and the next racer was taken out of the start gate. The attendants then strapped on their skis and left," said Jupiter. "With Langbinder and Bierbichler on the ball, the whole world will soon know about the accident."

"And The Three Investigators failed to stop it," Bob grumbled. "We were so close, we even saw the devil skier but couldn't intervene."

Toni comforted him. "It was not a complete failure. You were the only ones who almost stopped the accident. Look at it from the bright side—fortunately, nothing seriously happened."

"Not close enough," Jupiter said. "It's like a race. Things could happen in only a hundredth of a second."

The three continued to monitor the situation at the finish area. Among other things, they were on the lookout for a person with only one glove.

"He's not gonna be that stupid," Bob said. "I think he's more cautious and clever than anything."

"He made his appearance for the first time today," Jupiter replied. "That way we already know he's behind this case."

"Unless there are more people involved," Toni looked at Jupiter brightly.

He nodded. "You're right. But we can be sure that at least one man is involved."

"It could also be a woman," Toni remarked. "Who can tell at such a distance? We only saw one person in a dark red and black ski suit and snow goggles."

Jupiter looked slightly annoyed, but he had to agree with him. "But a woman is not strong enough to push such a heavy branch," he said, although at the same time he knew that he would not get away with such a remark.

Toni also immediately pulled a face. "Maybe not your American girls," he said. "But you don't know the strong Austrians are, even though I'm not saying that he or she is an Austrian."

Jupiter denied himself an answer. Bob realized that Toni and Jupiter would probably not become friends for life.

“Maybe Pete could get something out of it,” Bob changed the subject and tried to smile at both Jupiter and Toni nicely. “But there’s still time until we meet him. Let’s see what’s going on here.”

At that moment Jupiter nudged Bob and pointed to a man who was on a mobile phone and standing a short distance away. “That’s a policeman. I can smell it a hundred miles away.”

“Let’s go right there,” Bob suggested. “After all, Toni and I are witnesses. Let’s get this over with.”

“What shall we tell him?” Jupiter asked. “That we’re Karen’s bodyguards? Or should we give him the cousin story?” Jupiter was right, of course.

“We’re just making ourselves suspicious,” Toni agreed with Jupe for once. “Let’s keep a low profile.”

Karen arrived at the finish area in a snowmobile along with some German officials. The police immediately shielded her from the journalists and escorted her into a police van. The man with the mobile phone also ran there and was let through to the van. So he was actually a cop. Together with a colleague, he first interviewed Karen, then called the marshal. When the skier got out of the van again, the journalists jumped at her.

Jupiter could make out Langbinder, who waved frantically at Bierbichler signalling to him to make his way through the crowd. “Can you tell us what happened... Are you injured... Do you have a clue... Will you start at the big race...” the questions whirled up.

Karen didn’t say anything. Some German officials tried to shield her from the crowd. Jürgen, Karen’s ZACK technician was also among them. “We take her to our van and then drive her to her hotel,” he said to the crowd.

After Karen and the officials got into the van, it went off.

9. Pete is Stuck

While Vail was buzzing with activities, Pete was still crouching close to the outside wall of the cabin trying to get as much as possible of what was going on inside. The visitor, whom the SPEED men had so rudely received, was subjected to an interrogation. In the beginning, he fought back. "I'll report you! Get that dog off me!"

But the two men from SPEED were not impressed. "Actually, we're the ones to report you. We have enough notices out there to warn you not to trespass and you have entered here without authorization. It was just a little accident with the dog. This can happen to uninvited visitors." A sneering laugh followed.

Pete was upset about the cynical nature of the two men, but he could not help the visitor. In the meantime, the dog growled fiercely a few times, and the man found himself in an increasingly difficult position. He admitted to being an employee of ZACK. Actually, it didn't take the men much time to figure that out.

"What are you doing here, trying to spy on us?" asked the bearded man.

"I'm not a spy. I just lost my way," the prisoner tried to explain, but the dog let his unfriendly voice be heard again. The prisoner had recognized the hopelessness of his situation. "Okay, okay. I wanted to see if I could see the new SPEED ski—the one everyone heard so much about. Of course, we are very interested in the new material and design."

"Too bad for you—you won't get to see the new ski now," said the bearded man. "But you'll see it eventually,"

"Yes, but when we start our tests, another winter would be over," the visitor said.

"That's good to know," the bearded man said with a smirk. "And the three stupid boys you've set on us, we're gonna get them too."

"What three boys?" the visitor asked.

"Now he's acting stupid again!" the bearded man said to Patrick. "Should we let Truck get a little closer to him?"

"I really don't know who you're talking about," the visitor exclaimed.

But Pete knew—the three stupid boys would be Jupe, Bob and himself. They had stopped on the way here to help the men in the SPEED van. Probably they had thought that they were going to spy on them. It was a clear case of paranoia, Pete tried to cheer himself. But actually he felt quite queasy. What if the men discovered him there? They'd never believe he wasn't working for the competition.

Inside, things were getting hot for the visitor in the meantime. Truck growled again that made the cabin shake. And so the threatened man admitted out of fear something that wasn't true. "Okay, okay. The three boys are from us too. I don't know them as they're from another department."

Phew, thought Pete, at that moment he just wants to get out of there safely. It'll get worse if they caught him. Pete wasn't keen on meeting Truck at all. He was wondering how he could leave without being noticed.

But then he'd have to move and Truck would probably hear him. On the other hand, he could barely stand up in his position. His knees hurt and his legs were numb. His skis were left standing far up hidden behind a stack of wood near the access road. It was impossible to

get there quickly with his numb legs and heavy ski boots. The dog would catch up with him easily. Should he risk it to go the longer way there?

Inside, chairs were dragged on the wooden floor. Apparently the one-sided conversation was over. “Well, get out of here,” said the bearded man. “And don’t you dare make trouble for us again. We can easily report you for breaking into and entering private property.”

Pete heard the door open and someone was pushed out. With the help of the mirror Pete saw the man strapping on his skis and glided off towards the test track.

Pete knew he had to move really slowly now. He carefully pulled out his right leg and tried to stretch it. But then it happened—he lost his balance and slid off the wall of the house into the snow. Immediately the dog started barking inside.

“Damn, there’s someone else,” shouted the bearded man.

Pete tried to get up and run away. But he didn’t get far. The door opened and Truck stormed towards him. Pete froze and attempted to approach the dog in a friendly manner. At least he stopped barking and did not jump at him, seemingly to wait for further instructions from the bearded one. Pete went on talking—some nonsense like ‘good dog, friendly dog’. Then the bearded man came around the corner, Pete recognized him immediately. It was not a very hopeful sight.

The bearded one called Truck to his side. “In here with you,” he ordered Pete, pointing around the corner.

The dog wouldn’t let him out of his sight. Pete had no choice but to go into the cabin.

The German ski team had retreated to a secluded place in the hotel’s bar. Jupiter, Bob and Toni arrived a little later and sat at another table some distance away. Somehow, nobody noticed them there and they were not asked to leave.

After the commotion had subsided, the head coach took the floor and discussed with the racers how to react to the incident. The three could hear the team’s discussion, only that it was all in German. But guess what? Toni understood it all and inconspicuously provided Juve and Bob with the interpretation. Anyway, the three did not look towards the direction of the German team, instead they pretended to talk amongst themselves.

The discussion was dominated by two opinions. Many of the athletes and coaches wanted to withdraw from the race. As long as the perpetrator had not been caught, the race was considered too dangerous. Jürgen, Karen’s service technician, was also of this opinion.

But the other service technicians did not want their skiers to withdraw, because Karen was the only one at risk anyway. After all, only she had received those strange messages. Moreover, it was unlikely that another planned accident of this sort would happen again during the big race, especially in the presence of so many spectators.

“Sure,” Jupiter murmured to Bob. “They’re secretly happy if Karen doesn’t race. After all, it improves the chances of the racers supported by the other ski companies.”

In the end, the tentative decision was that the German team would withdraw only Karen from the race. However, they had up to the morning of the race to make the final decision and inform the organizers. In the meantime, they would step up security and monitor the situation. If any untoward incidents occurred to the other athletes, the whole team could withdraw from the race citing reasons of security and well-being of their athletes.

Toni nodded contentedly. “Anything else would be mean.”

“The Austrians would also profit from it,” Jupiter provoked him.

“Not in this way!” Toni replied with conviction. “We’ll win anyway, but it should be in a fair competition.”

The three then observed that some members of the German team began to leave. It was noticeable that some of them were not too happy, presumably about Karen's possible withdrawal. As more and more members left, they saw that Karen and Nicola were still there at a table talking between themselves.

A brief moment, Karen looked over and Jupiter waved to her. She waved back. Jupiter signalled to her that he would want to have a word with her. Karen left the table and walked towards them.

Jupiter also left the table and approached Karen somewhere in the middle of the bar. "Hello, Karen. How's with you after that incident?"

She was visibly uncomfortable. "I guess I am all right now, but the coaches are a bit concerned. They want me to keep away from outsiders in case there are more incidents."

"I understand that," Jupiter said. "I won't take up much of your time, but we have some leads in our investigations. But I'd spare you the details until we are more certain. However, there is one thing you could help us in our investigations."

"Sure," Karen replied, "if it is within what I could do."

"Could you arrange for us to have a chat with Nicola?" Jupiter said.

"I suppose so," Karen replied. "To her, I have kept with the story that you are my cousin, and have not said anything about any investigations."

"Good," Jupiter said, "We'll keep to that story."

"The coach requires me to go back up to the room to rest," Karen said, "But Nicola should be free now. Perhaps I'll ask her if she could spare you some time. I'll tell her that you like to know something about the competition process."

"That'll be great," Jupiter replied excitedly. "My friends are all here as well."

"Okay, you wait back at your table for a moment," Karen said. "I'll talk to her."

Jupiter went back to his table and quickly briefed the rest. He emphasized that they need to keep to the cousin story and that they were there as fans.

About five minutes later, the two skiers then approached the boys' table. The three stood up and Jupiter introduced Bob and Toni to Nicola, who was visibly uncomfortable with the situation. Karen then said goodbye and left.

This was his chance, Jupiter thought, and took the initiative. "I appreciate you taking a few minutes of your time with us. My friends and I here are all fans of skiing."

She nodded, smiled but said nothing. Jupiter thought that it had been much easier to get into conversation with the journalists earlier. Perhaps her speechlessness was due to her not being very well-versed in English. "Am I talking too fast? I'm sorry, I'll can speak slower."

"No, it's okay," Nicola said. "I can understand you well, but I am not very fluent replying in English. Do you understand German?"

"*Ich bin Österreicher!*" Toni spoke up. "*Ich kann für dich dolmetschen!*"

"*Wunderbar!*" Jupiter exclaimed. "Then Toni can interpret for us!"

Jupiter chatted around a little to put her in a conversational mood. He spoke excitedly on getting this rare chance for him and his friends to meet up with international stars like herself. "I have hardly seen Karen in recent years," Jupiter said, as he went on to tell her the difficulties in contacting a cousin who lives on another continent. "The telephone charges alone are horrendous," he moaned.

Nicola laughed. While Toni interpreted, Bob remained silent and let Jupe rattle on. Slowly, the conversation went better and better.

Then Jupiter decided to bluff. "Karen told me that you two don't get along so well right now."

Nicola jumped right at it. She was annoyed that Karen told them that. It's all nonsense. A little more conciliatory, she admitted that there's something to it. Karen had a very different personality from her, who was quieter. And now as Karen was as successful as ever, Nicola was just going after her.

"Well, and the media's all over Karen, too," Jupiter said apologetically.

It was actually quite all right with Nicola. What made her tired was that the journalists report about her in a completely different light. They always put special emphasis on her failures. However, towards Karen, they were a lot more forgiving. But it was not just the journalists.

"What do you mean?" Bob took his turn to ask.

She even felt different treatments from the team members—including the coaches. She then explained that she was not from the Alps like the others. She came from the Black Forest.

"We was once in the Swabian Alps near Stuttgart," Jupiter said.

Nicola smiled, but explained to Juve that the Black Forest was right next door. The coaches and trainers all come from the Alps and, for a long time, they didn't believe that Nicola had what it took to succeed.

Although Nicola could train well with them, she had to cope with kind of treatment she received. In the beginning, she wasn't even allowed to participate in races, even with very good training times. Then she finally got her chance and did well in races and so had some peace. But recently, she had missed out on a few Slaloms and wasn't in top shape for downhill, and she believed that coaches would probably say that they had expected that to happen.

"So you had to fight your way through this?" Juve asked.

Nicola agreed and said that she wouldn't have had so much success if not of the support from home, especially from her friends."

"You have a boyfriend?" Jupiter asked, as Bob thought: "Here we go again."

Nicola said yes, even though she didn't see him much as she travelled a lot, but he's helping her a lot.

"Is he here too?"

She said that he would arrive for the race on Sunday.

Jupiter nodded. Then Nicola said that she needed to go back up her room to rest. The three thanked her for the time and wished her the very best. She left the table while the boys remained there.

Jupiter thanked Toni for the interpretation. "We couldn't have gotten so much out of her if not for your interpretation!" Toni was elated. Then Juve continued: "Now we need to summarize and analyze the information. Bob, could you jot down the points?"

During the conversation Jupiter tried to assess to what extent Nicola answered him honestly or whether she was hiding something. Obviously he wasn't very clear about it, although he felt a tendency to take Nicola out of the group of suspects. He did feel for her.

The pressure of the media was certainly enormous. He had been given an inkling of this by Langbinder and Bierbichler, who had really made it clear that the media and probably also the viewers preferred the nice and open competitors like Karen, who apparently managed everything so easily. Actually, that was unfair, of course. But since television not only reported on sporting events, but increasingly also on the individual athlete, the stars were expected to drum up more and more entertainment value for the audience. This also had an effect on advertising funds. Athletes who didn't meet the journalists' expectations could be snubbed.

All in all, of course, there was a strong motive—if this pressure became too great, it could lead to the less popular athlete turning against the competitor out of jealousy. The unjust behaviour of the coaches had also intensified the competitiveness. And then there was her boyfriend... On the other hand, if Nicola was really behind the messages, why did she tell everything so openly now?—especially to Karen's cousin.

Then Jupiter looked at this watch and said: "We're pretty late already. Let's get out of here. We have to meet Pete!"

Twilight had already set in. Toni went back to his hotel, and they arranged to meet the next morning. Bob was pleased that things had gotten along so well with Toni right away. He was also relieved that Jupiter had been very cool with Toni, especially after he had helped so much with the interpretations.

As Jupe and Bob made their way back to the apartment, they could see that the returning skiers from the mountains brought life to the streets of Vail. Many were ready for the evening activities.

Shortly, the two had arrived back at their apartment. They had expected a bad-tempered Pete, because they were late. But they didn't see any light in the apartment from the outside.

Pete obviously wasn't there yet. Jupe and Bob ran up the stairs and unlocked the door. There was no sign of Pete. "I hope he's not in any danger," Bob said.

Jupiter waved off. "Let's wait a while to see whether he's back."

But when Pete didn't show up in the next half hour, even Jupiter got nervous. "Okay, Bob, we have to do something. Where do we look for him? We don't even have an idea where he is."

"Maybe he left a message," Bob suggested. They searched the apartment, but found nothing.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "Assuming he was in a hurry to tell us where he was going, he probably wouldn't have come up to the apartment to leave us a message."

"What are you saying?" Bob asked.

"It will probably take him too long to get up to the apartment," Jupe replied. "Let's take a look downstairs."

The two of them ran down the stairs. When they saw the blue question mark drew by Pete on the mailbox, they wondered why they hadn't noticed it earlier. They had lost valuable time in the process. Jupiter unfolded the piece of paper and looked at Bob. "A sketch of the location of a SPEED cabin. It's in the middle of the mountains. How are we going to get there fast?"

"I have a feeling that Pete's in trouble," Bob said.

"My head says the same thing to me," Jupiter replied. "Does your feeling tell you how we are going to this cabin? The ski lifts are no longer running and there's no road up there either."

"No," Bob said, thinking briefly. "But my head has an idea for that. I saw many of those service technicians ride snowmobiles. Perhaps we could check with Karen's service technician, Jürgen. I'm sure he can get us one of those. They go fast on the slopes."

"Great idea!" Jupiter was thrilled. "I'll have to call Karen to get to him."

Bob and Jupiter decided not to let Karen or Jürgen in on the exact circumstances. They feared that Pete might have somehow got into some trouble with the SPEED employees.

Jupiter picked up the phone and called Karen. He explained that he needed help to get to Pete who was probably up in the slopes, and for that, he needed to urgently borrow a

snowmobile from Jürgen. Karen agreed to speak with Jürgen and would call Jupiter back.

Within five minutes, Karen called back and said that Jürgen had a rental snowmobile and would not be using it as he would be with Karen all evening. He had agreed to let them use it, but they had to get it from her hotel.

Jupiter and Bob quickly took a bus to the Sonnenalp Hotel. Jürgen and Karen waited for them at the bar. Jupiter was worried when he took a closer look at Karen. She still looked upset by the accident and her possible withdrawal from the race. Often the shock comes much later.

He would have liked to have stayed there to cheer her up a little. But The Three Investigators could also help in other ways. “We’re going to take care of our assignment tonight,” he said to her. She nodded and smiled, so she understood that the detectives were on a hot trail.

Jürgen led them outside where a few snowmobiles were parked. He brought them to a Touring 2-Up Snowmobile, one with seats built for two riders. “I guess you would need this,” he said.

“Perfect,” Bob said. Jürgen explained the main functions to them. It wasn’t particularly difficult for Bob to operate as he had rode a motorcycle before.

On the bench there was a small net from a ski barrier. Jupiter grabbed it and put it into the luggage compartment. The two detectives promised to Jürgen that they would handle the snowmobile carefully. After both of them donned helmets, Bob took over the controls and started the engine, and Jupiter sat behind him. Jürgen looked on briefly after them as they rode towards the snowmobile track.

As they were going up, Bob turned back briefly to Jupiter and shouted: “Hey Jupe! This is a two-seater snowmobile. How are we going to get Pete back?”

Jupe was silent for a while, and then he shouted back: “We’ll figure it out later. First, we have to find him!”

Meanwhile, the situation became more and more dicey for Pete. The two SPEED employees put him under pressure. As with the earlier visitor, they accused him of trespassing on their private property and they pressed him with questions—what he was doing there, who his friends were, for whom he worked with... An endless spiral of questions with which they wanted to wear him down.

Pete knew that he had to buy some time. Earlier, when he was spying on them, he knew that one of the men were to meet the mysterious blond tonight. So he had to leave at some point. The more the men asked him for details, Pete had to creatively invent the answers.

In the beginning he had denied encroaching on them, but it was bad for him. The dog was immediately brought into play. Then Pete basically repeated parts of the story that the earlier visitor had told the two for the sake of simplicity and credibility. He said that Jupiter, Bob and he had been hired by ZACK. He also kept to the story that the earlier visitor and the three were from the same company but in different departments. Pete then said that when he came, he saw the earlier visitor leaving the cabin. He only approached the cabin to see what his colleague was up to.

Fortunately, his guards seemed to believe that they had spotted him just as he arrived at the cabin. They obviously had no idea he listened to the earlier conversation. If only that unpleasant dog hadn’t lurked at every move he made. Pete longed for Jupiter and Bob. He hoped they found his message on the mailbox, else he wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer.

10. The Trick with the Net

Bob rode first along the illuminated snowmobile track, on which many Vail visitors turned up on their evening pleasure rounds. A while later, he turned into a forest and drove up into the mountains. During the hustle and bustle, it was hardly noticeable that a vehicle did not take the prescribed course.

It suddenly got dark under the trees. Even the headlights didn't help much. Only after the two had driven for a while did their eyes get used to the darkness. The pale light of the moon and the shine of the clear starry sky penetrated through the tree tops. The snow reflected the light.

When they came out of the forest, they could see the mountain ranges, the white slopes and the dark forest edges. In the night, the mountains appeared completely different—dark, cold, deserted, and inhospitable. It was lonely here. Luckily Jupiter had memorized the slopes exactly and they found their way around.

Far behind them lay the brightly-lit Vail. Jupiter and Bob glanced at the mountains shimmering coldly in the moonlight, piling up in front of them. Slowly they approached the remote back of the mountains. Here were the famous Back Bowls. It became more and more difficult for Bob to keep the snowmobile under control. The slopes became steeper and steeper. Behind a bend it suddenly went down steeply. Bob yanked the steering wheel around, but the runners in front didn't grip well. The snowmobile got into an inclined position and slid off.

"Bob, why don't you step on it!" Jupiter shouted. Both stared down the slope in horror, trying to figure out whether they were heading for a bush, a tree, a rock or just another hill.

"Jump!" Bob shouted, because he saw something dark approaching. He threw himself out of the snowmobile. Jupiter did not hesitate for a moment either. Both rolled on the snow. The snowmobile turned and slipped towards a thicket where it got stuck. The sound of the engine died and the headlights went out. Jupiter and Bob slid into the thicket near the vehicle.

"Oww," Bob shouted, "the branches are scratching my face!"

"Be glad that they stopped us," Jupe said while getting up on his feet. "Who knows where else we could have ended. But now it's thinking ahead. How do we get out of here? It's freezing."

"I'm pretty hurt," Bob said and rolled out of the thicket. "A little sympathy from you would be nice."

But Jupiter did not allow himself to be softened. "Well, you did bring us here after all."

"But your super brain didn't read the map right!" Bob argued. "This slope is definitely marked as very steep. But if we keep arguing, we'll never get out of here."

"Well, let's take care of the snowmobile," Jupe said.

At that moment they heard an engine sound, it sounded like another snowmobile.

"It's coming from over there," Bob said as he pointed up towards the source of the engine sound. "So there's another way up. But who can that be at this hour?"

"Maybe someone's coming to save us," Jupe said. The vehicle was getting closer. The headlights flashed through the trees. "We'll have to run if we're going to stop him! Or he'll ride past us."

Jupiter stood up and wanted to move, but his feet sank into the deep snow. Bob tried as well, but it was like walking in slow motion. The headlights came closer and closer, but it was not shining on both of them.

“Help!” Jupiter shouted, raising and waving his hands, but it was in vain. The vehicle was too loud. They could see through the thicket a person on a snowmobile as it passed and disappeared into the dark. The engine noise progressively became quieter.

“Damn!” Jupiter was furious when he stepped into the snow.

“Maybe it was all right,” said Bob, who had came up behind him. “It might as well have been an unpleasant encounter. Think about the SPEED men, or the devil skier. I wouldn’t be keen on meeting any of them, even if there were two of us here.”

“You’re right, Bob. After all, we are very close to the cabin. We should try the path the other snowmobile took.”

“We have to get our vehicle back in shape, otherwise it’ll look bleak,” Bob said.

Jupiter spurred his thoughts on. “If the mysterious driver was from SPEED, then there must be a forest path, over which you can comfortably get to the cabin. I’m sure they don’t try slopes like what we just did.”

Jupiter wanted to check the map so Bob held out a torch to him.

“I’ve got it!” Jupiter said with satisfaction. “A small winding forest path, not an official track, but it is not steep. On my map, it’s just a thin line. It’s got to be the way that that guy just rode on.”

Both of them got the snowmobile back upright. Bob took to the controls again, waited a moment, as if to make it exciting, then turned the ignition key. The engine started up, and Jupe nodded with relief. He got on behind and Bob made a turn and went up the track.

A few minutes later, Jupe signalled to Bob that the cabin was near. “But we can’t get too close to it,” Jupe said. “The engine noise is too loud.”

He directed Bob to the ridge behind which the SPEED cabin was supposed to be. Bob turned the snowmobile around parked it by the side of the road in a way that they could get away fast in case of an emergency. On the flat road they went on foot much better than in the deep snow.

Very soon, they saw the cabin. It was lit up, the shutters unlocked. “We should be able to look into the window from the front of the hill,” Jupiter said. “We have the advantage of standing in the dark and looking into the light. We can see in, but can’t be seen from the inside.”

Through the window they could see two people, one of them was undoubtedly Pete. He sat on a chair facing the window with his arms crossed behind his back. A man stood diagonally in front of Pete, obviously guarding him. He had turned his back towards the window.

“I don’t think that Pete is sitting there voluntarily and is in a conversation about his skiing skills,” whispered Bob.

Jupiter agreed. “They have detained him. The man will make sure that Pete doesn’t leave... unless we do something about it.”

At that moment the man turned a little to the side and the two detectives recognized him. Bob whispered: “Sure, that’s one of the two SPEED men—the smaller unshaven one. But where’s the bearded one?”

“You should know,” Jupiter replied.

“He went past us earlier,” Bob replied.

“One hundred points.” Jupiter bent over a bit. “Hold on, isn’t there a dog sitting there?”

Bob saw it as well. “He’s next to Pete’s chair and won’t let him out of his sight.”

“Even that,” Jupiter moaned, “we’d have to use our ingenuity to get Pete out of there.”

“I’d rather we were back with Jürgen and talk about snowmobiling.” Bob pushed a heap of snow together with his foot.

“We’d better think of something,” Jupiter said. “The man’s always talking at Pete. Look how he’s suddenly gesticulating. We’ll have to do something fast because it’ll be worse if the other man comes back.”

The two detectives saw Pete jerking his shoulders when the dog moved towards him. Only now did they realize that Pete had not voluntarily crossed his arms behind the chair. His hands were tied together.

“We have to get to him somehow.” Jupiter pulled Bob by the sleeve. “In the snowmobile, there is a small net. You go get it. In the meantime, I’ll signal to Pete we’re here with our bird call. Hurry up.” Bob wondered why Jupiter needed the net, but he just got up and left.

The Three Investigators had in previous cases, used the call of the rare songbird, the Red-bellied Flycatcher, to signal among themselves inconspicuously.

Jupe formed his hands over his mouth into a shell and imitated the Red-bellied Flycatcher. After the fourth cry, Pete turned his face twice to the window. Apparently, he got the signal.

Carefully, Jupiter stood on a stone slab sticking out of the snow. Some light fell out of the window here. Pete nodded that he had noticed Jupe. Pete then began to distract his guard by talking and sliding around with the chair so as to reduced the risk that Jupe would be seen.

Bob came back with the net in his hand. The First Investigator told him to wait in the darkness and stood back on the stone. As Pete looked up at the window again, Jupe signalled to him the plan. Jupe pointed to his watch, showed the number three with his fingers, pointed to Pete and described with his index finger a curve through the door up to the path. Pete slipped back and forth on his chair and nodded briefly. He had understood what Jupiter wanted to do.

They could hear a few words from the cabin through the cold night. It was Pete’s voice. “Release... for hours...” The man answered something back. Pete just had to be careful not to provoke the dog too much. Jupiter sneaked back to Bob and whispered something to him. Then they both approached the door carefully. Jupiter chose one side of the door, Bob the other. They kept the net stretched flat over the ground directly in front of the door sill.

The whole thing lasted around two minutes. From inside the cabin, Pete’s voice could be heard. “Should I pee on the floor here? Why don’t you let me out of here for a minute? I really need to pee. I’ve been here a long time. You can come with me.”

Steps were then heard. “All right, then,” the man said. “But don’t think you can get out of here in the mountains. You’ll just freeze to death. Besides, the dog’s gonna get you anyway. I’ll untie you and come with you... Easy, Truck.”

“Ready, Bob?” Jupiter whispered, almost inaudibly. They tightened the net, but still kept it pressed into the snow.

Now it came down to it. Inside the chair slipped, Pete had apparently got up. Jupiter and Bob looked at each other. Every muscle was tensed. Hopefully Pete had understood and the timing was perfect. That’s when Pete opened the door. He leapt out into the snow very quickly.

“To the road, Pete,” Jupiter shouted. At the same moment, Jupiter and Bob pulled up the net.

Not a moment too soon, the dog raced out and got caught in the net, howling. The man stumbled behind and completed the mess. Jupiter and Bob quickly used the attached rope to

tie the net up and hooked the whole bundle to the door handle. That should provide them with a head start.

Despite his heavy ski boots Pete had almost reached the road. When he arrived there, he looked around and breathed a short sigh of relief. Jupiter and Bob came running up to him. Pete had to grin involuntarily—as unathletic as Jupe was, but when it mattered, he ran his best times.

Bob pointed the way. “Pete! We have a snowmobile! But it can’t take the three of us!”

“You have your skis somewhere here?” Jupe asked Pete.

“Yes,” Pete replied. “Over there by the stack of wood.”

“Good!” Jupe said, “You have to ski back. Find another way out. Bob and I will divert them away on the snowmobile!”

“But we must hurry, because the other SPEED man will be back soon,” Pete said and disappeared behind a woodpile.

Bob got onto the snowmobile and started the engine. Then Jupe threw himself on the seat, and waited for Truck and the man.

Pete got to his skis and started to put them on. “I would hate to sacrifice these,” he thought. “After all, they’re not SPEED!”

It was about time. The man and dog had freed themselves from the net and approached them. The dog had taken the direct path through the deep snow. “Chase, Truck, chase!” shouted the man whose right foot was still stuck onto the net, which slowed him down.

“Go!” Jupiter screamed as Bob stepped on it. Truck chased for a distance but the snowmobile was too fast.

Meanwhile, Pete was back on his skis and he look around and decided to take the longer way around the cabin, just in case Truck or the bearded man came back through the narrow path.

A while later, Truck had given up chasing. Jupe pulled out his map and lit it with his flashlight. He was in top form and directed Bob as if he had known the track for years. Bob felt like a touring racer whose co-driver with the notepad on his knees was giving acceleration and braking commands.

Jupiter knew, of course, that they could hardly avoid the SPEED man on this narrow path. Later on the slopes, that wouldn’t be a problem. There they could take a detour. Dark woods flew by. Bob stuck to the narrow white of the track.

Ironically, it happened in a tight bend, of all places. A bright light came towards them. It was the other snowmobile. Bob could barely get out of the way. “Step on it,” Jupiter shouted. “Here comes a long straight line! And then we’ll be on the regular slope.”

“The bearded man has yet to turn if he even wants to pursue us,” Jupe shouted. “He probably doesn’t know it’s us.”

But it was only a few second later when Jupe shouted back: “Damn, he’s coming!”

The snowmobile buzzed down the mountain. It can’t be that far to the slopes, Bob thought. The light from the other vehicle came closer.

“Bob, full throttle!” Jupe shouted and looked back. A few seconds later, his instructions were no longer necessary. They had left the narrow path and were on a wide slope. In the moonlight you could see them well. Despite the engine noise, they heard the man behind them cursing. The pursuer’s headlights were left behind.

Bob steered the snowmobile quickly and safely towards Vail. The lights of the town appeared. There were only a few curves left.

Finally they reached the feeder road, which led to the snowmobile circuit. And all of a sudden they were again among many people who enjoyed the winter evening in a relaxed and

good mood. They were just riding around on their snowmobile for fun or watching others. In the streets of Vail the passers-by were on their way to eat or looking for a cosy bar.

“We still have to wait here for Pete.” Jupiter breathed deeply. “I would hardly have thought that I could be so happy with the sight of chic winter vacationers. After this chase through the darkness, I could hug them all!”

In about ten minutes, he saw Pete skiing down. He had taken another route and did not even see the bearded man going back up to the cabin. Bob and Jupe waved out to him.

“Thanks, guys.” Pete took a deep breath.

Slowly Jupiter came to his breath again. “No problem,” he murmured. “But now we’ll have to discuss the situation back at the apartment.”

But Bob did not want to miss the opportunity to do another lap on the snowmobile course—proudly, like a race winner. However, he had to imagine the crowd cheering for him. No one knew how successfully they had just completed their escape. Jupiter rode along and joined him to have some fun, while Pete made his own way to the Sonnenalp Hotel. Finally, Bob steered into the parking lot where Jürgen had parked the snowmobile.

In the hotel restaurant, the German ski team were not there anymore. Apparently, everyone was in their rooms. Bob made a call to Jürgen, thanked him and told him that everything went well. He then handed the snowmobile key to the reception. “I’m glad this thing didn’t get a scratch,” he whispered to Jupe.

“And I’m glad we didn’t get a scratch as well,” Pete said. “Let’s hope it stays that way!”

11. New Plans

After this eventful day, The Three Investigators were happy to be together again. They decided to remain at the cosy, warm and above all quiet holiday apartment and to recapitulate the events of the day over a hot cup of tea.

Pete was the first to report. He began to talk about his search for the cabin and the conversations he overheard, including the interrogation of the ZACK employee.

"If our two SPEED friends have been in the cabin all this time, they can't have carried out the accident," Bob interrupted him.

"Accident? What accident?" Pete hadn't heard of it yet.

So Bob then took over and started to tell how he and Toni had witnessed Karen's accident.

"Who's Toni?" Pete asked.

"Oh yes, you don't know him yet," Jupiter said. "Toni is from Vienna and he's Bob's current snowboard buddy."

"He's pretty good with his board," Bob threw in and gave Pete the cue to rap snowboarding again.

"Well, you and your snowboard, it's not a sport!" Pete quipped. "You sit around in the snow all day and get a cold butt..."

"Toni's all right," Bob interrupted him.

Bob then continued with what happened in the accident, including the witnessing the actions of the devil skier. "Karen was really lucky! It was both luck and skill that got her through."

Pete followed his friend's story with excitement. When Bob finished, Pete said: "The SPEED men really couldn't have done it. At least not by themselves."

"You mean there are others involved?" Jupiter asked. "Were there any clues to that?"

"Oh yes! They spoke of a blond man of whom the bearded man was to meet tonight," Pete said. "That's why he went out on the snowmobile."

"Then the blond man could be the one doing the dirty work," Bob said.

"Could be," Pete said. "But his role is not clear from the conversation I heard. Besides, I learned something else—they want to push out their new ski for training. The only problem is that the ski hasn't been tested properly yet. But it seems to be something completely new—new material and new design. The competitors are aware of it but not in detail. And guess who they're gonna try that thing on?"

"Nicola?" Jupiter said.

Pete looked annoyed. "At least for my sake, you could have guessed wrong."

"So it's Nicola," Jupiter repeated while pinching his lower lip. "Something's wrong with SPEED. They don't have enough success. But Nicola also lacks success. She told us her story today. Actually, I feel sorry for her."

"Jupe, could you leave your lower lip alone for once? You sound really funny." Bob grinned at Pete.

Outwardly undisturbed, Jupiter continued: "She's not an athlete the media goes for. She had to work her way through the ski team because she was considered an outsider. She's

always under pressure. But I just don't think she's capable of that kind of entanglement. And then there's her boyfriend, who, she says, is very supportive. I'm sure he's very interested in her achieving more success again."

"We need to find out if he's blond," Bob said. "Maybe he's the link to SPEED."

"And Nicola may not know anything about his activities," Jupiter continued.

"If that's the case at all," Pete said.

"But, let's think about the devil skier for a moment," Jupiter asked his friends. "What do we know about him?"

"He's probably a blond man," Bob said. "That's all—except for the suspicion that SPEED might be behind it, or even Nicola's boyfriend."

Jupiter wasn't satisfied. "We know more than that. The colour of his ski suit—dark red and black. We have a photograph of his ski glove. And he probably wrote those messages."

"Truly, those puzzling messages," Pete interrupted him.

Jupiter looked annoyed again. "Pete, he's playing with us. In his last message, there was a direct reference to what he was up to—'Eyes on the slope'. The message fits nicely to the accident. Since nobody managed to stop him, he thinks he's always one step ahead. We need to see if Karen gets any more messages from him."

"And that will give us a clue to what he is up to next," Bob added.

"He has also shown today that he is serious," Jupiter concluded. He turned to Pete again. "We interrupted you earlier. You still haven't told us why you became a house guest at SPEED."

"That's right, it started with a foot falling asleep. I slid down the wall of the cabin, the dog growled, and the two of them invited me to their cabin in their friendly way."

"What did you tell them?"

"I had to latch on to the story that the earlier chap told them," Pete said. "So I said that we three are also ZACK employees. They thought we're trying to spy on their new ski, so they pressured me to get more details. Only, what should I tell them? I don't know anything about that. But they didn't believe me. The bearded man wanted to question this ominous blond about us at his meeting. The pressure to succeed in the ski industry makes them all incredibly nervous."

"The shining image of your perfect skiing world is breaking apart," Bob mocked Pete.

"This is nothing unique about the skiing world," Pete snapped. "It's the same wherever dollars and success are at stake. Just watch out, it's going to be this way in the snowboarding business, too."

"Pete and Bob, stop arguing," Jupiter wanted to discuss the next steps against SPEED.

Pete reached for his glass. "They want to report me for breaking and entering."

"They won't do that because we know too much," Bob replied.

"They'd say that I'm a burglar," Pete added. "And there will be endless accusations."

"Bob's right," Jupiter decided. "They won't take action against us for now, at least not with the police. They are just threatening us in case we do anything on our end. They don't know exactly what you heard, Pete. Or did you tell them?"

"No. They probably don't even know that I heard them that well through the walls. They were convinced that I appeared just after they got rid of the other chap."

Jupiter nodded in agreement. "Very well, we have an advantage now. Let's see what's our next step should be. What are we going to do tomorrow? Probably there will be another training, at least for the rest of the German team. We could find out more about Nicola's boyfriend."

“Actually, we have to warn Nicola against these unscrupulous SPEED people because they want her to use the dangerous new ski,” said Pete.

“Yes, but I have a hunch that that won’t happen tomorrow,” Jupe said. “Do you know why? When you heard those two wanting to get Nicola to use the ski, they might not have known about the accident yet. But now, I’m sure they won’t use it tomorrow. After the accident, everyone will be far too careful and nervous.”

“So we have to get up early tomorrow morning and check on Nicola’s boyfriend,” Bob moaned. “And I thought of sleeping in late.”

“Yes, I’m sorry, Bob,” Jupiter said. “But we have an assignment here. You can sleep in on vacation!”

12. MacManoman Shows Up

The next morning, Bob was the first on his feet. He took care of breakfast while Pete was still brushing his teeth in the bathroom. Jupiter rolled around in bed and couldn't be woken up. Later, when he appeared for breakfast, Bob reminded him of the assignment on hand.

"Remember, we're not on vacation here," he quoted Jupiter with a subtle twist.

"A mastermind needs regeneration," Jupiter replied briefly, "otherwise it won't work."

Bob stayed sharp. "Then today must be an absolute top day!"

Pete poked around in his cereal and changed the subject. "We should call our girlfriends and tell them we're still alive."

"And that we get up at the crack of dawn to be detectives," Bob added.

"There's time this afternoon," Jupiter decided.

Just as they were about to leave, the doorbell rang. Apparently, there were people who got up even earlier.

It's like watching a movie, Bob thought when he opened the door. He looked into a crumpled face, whose inexpressible impression was only surpassed by the sight of his bulbous nose. It was the cop Jupiter and Bob had seen from a distance yesterday—a policeman like they'd normally see on TV. The early guest introduced himself as Detective MacManoman and asked if he could come in. Bob took him to the kitchen and asked him to sit down. "A cup of tea?"

"I only drink coffee," said MacManoman.

Pete offered to make some quickly, and MacManoman graciously agreed. "Okay, but only if you make it really strong!" While Pete poured the water in, the policeman looked around. "Which one of you is Jupiter Jones?"

Jupiter came forward. "May I also introduce the others—Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews, my friends."

"Jupiter—may I call you Jupiter?—so you're a cousin of Karen Sulzenberger."

Aha, Jupiter noted that Karen had stuck with her story, and MacManoman hadn't checked him out yet. That was a good thing. The police did not like competition from detectives too much.

"Yes."

"You and your friend Bob were out on the slopes yesterday. I'd like to know exactly what you saw."

Bob reported in detail, then Jupiter. MacManoman wrote in his notebook, and asked questions in between. He was particularly interested in the description of the devil skier. Then he turned to Pete and asked: "Where were you at the time?"

Pete was prepared. "I was out skiing, exploring the area a little."

"Did you see anything suspicious?"

Pete had also expected this question. While MacManoman was questioning Jupiter and Bob, Pete had been thinking. The SPEED men threatened to report him as a burglar. Juve's probably right, they didn't. Pete also didn't want to explain why he had been spying at the cabin. A brief eye contact with Jupiter and Bob reaffirmed that he should keep quiet.

"Something suspicious? No, no."

“Aha! So you’re alone and just skiing around for amusement?” MacManoman quipped.

Pete ignored the ironic tone and answered objectively. “I’m the best skier among the three of us. I’ve been looking for some more challenging slopes that they won’t even attempt.” MacManoman was obviously satisfied with that answer.

“Okay,” he said, stretched. “That’s it for now.” He kept his notes.

“Have you found anything out yet?” Bob wanted to know.

“No,” MacManoman replied very succinctly. Then he suddenly intensified the tone and dropped his initial politeness. “What I didn’t like at all, by the way, is that someone reported that they saw you looking around behind the safety barrier. What were you doing there? Was it the two of you?” He pointed to Jupe and Bob.

“We wanted to see if we could still find the guy,” Jupiter said. “But we’ve made sure we don’t mess up the traces.”

“Did you notice anything?”

“Only the glove.”

MacManoman flinched. “What glove?”

“Didn’t you find it?” Bob asked, surprised. “A ski glove hung from a bush.”

“There was nothing,” MacManoman said.

Then the culprit must have returned for it, Jupiter thought. That’s cheeky. He noticed the loss and got the glove back quickly before the police got there.

“What did the glove look like?” MacManoman wanted to know.

“We have a photo of it,” Bob shouted. “Here, in the camera is the film.”

MacManoman nodded approvingly. He wanted to take the film right away. That, in turn, wasn’t all right with Bob. “But there are other photos on the film—photos from our last school party—with our girlfriends.”

“It doesn’t matter,” MacManoman said.

“We were a little silly, though,” Bob remarked. “The celebration was already far advanced...”

“We’ve seen worse things than pubescent students,” MacManoman said dryly, then asking Bob to take out the film. Bob did so and gave it to MacManoman who then put it in his pocket, got up and went to the door. The Three Investigators looked at each other. MacManoman wouldn’t exactly be their favourite cop.

“Well, have fun, then,” Jupiter said. “And I hope you won’t charge us for developing our photos. Three copies each, please.”

MacManoman grinned, nodded briefly and disappeared.

“Well countered, Jupe,” Pete said. “Let’s show him what pubescent boys can do.”

Although the investigators wanted to start off early, MacManoman had taken up some time from them. Jupiter picked up the phone and called the Sonnenalp Hotel. Luckily, Karen was in her room.

Jupiter noticed that immediately that Karen had lost her flamboyance and self-confidence. She also spoke much more quietly.

“It’s not until today that I felt the shock,” Karen said. “Yesterday, everything happened so fast. The accident, the journalists, the police—all this is going on in front of me again today like movie clips.”

Jupiter reported about MacManoman’s visit. “He’s a bit arrogant and condescending,” he characterized him.

“He was actually very nice to me,” Karen said. “Very obliging and considerate. But he still doesn’t have a lead. Do you have one?”

“We have some ideas, but I actually can’t say anything yet,” Jupiter replied. The fact that MacManoman had turned his sugar-sweet side on Karen annoyed him very much. This led him to believe that The Three Investigators were faster in their investigations than MacManoman.

“Just fine with me,” Karen said.

Karen then told Jupiter that the team had reached a tentative decision to pull her out of the race, as what Jupiter had earlier learned by eavesdropping on the German team discussion the day before. All necessary security measures had been initiated. “They say they don’t want to surrender to a perpetrator like that. It’s that simple,” Karen said bitterly. “Sure, the business interests, the TV contracts, the competition—a single person doesn’t matter to them at all. The show must go on...”

“Today there will even be further training,” Karen continued, “but not the entire German team will take part. I’ll be staying at the hotel all day.”

“Who’s with you?”

“My technician Jürgen. Oh, yes. Many greetings from him and a thank you for returning the snowmobile keys.”

“Actually we have to thank him very much for letting us use the snowmobile,” Jupe said. “What about Nicola?”

“Oh, Nicola,” Karen said. “She was a bit shaken up with my accident yesterday. She has not decided whether she would race tomorrow. But, she’s training today and is now in the mountains with the others. The SPEED guys picked her up a while ago.”

“Is her boyfriend here?” Jupiter asked.

“He didn’t want to come to the race till Sunday, I think,” Karen replied.

“Uh, Karen, I cannot say much now, but I would after we make more investigations,” Jupiter said, “And there is something you might be able to help.”

“I’ll help, of course,” Karen said. “As before, if it is within my means to do so.”

“Does Nicola happen to have a photo of her boyfriend in your room?” Jupiter said quickly and exchanged a few meaningful glances with Pete and Bob, who in the meantime listened attentively to the conversation.

“Uh, wait... Let’s see... I don’t see a photo in the room... But I might have a group photo with the team and a couple of friends taken at the last competition in St. Moritz in Switzerland,” Karen replied. “Wait... Do you suspect that he has something to do with this?”

“We can’t be sure,” Jupiter said. “Someone told us about him, and we have to keep our eyes open.”

“Okay, hold on the line,” Karen said. “I’ll look for it.”

A minute later, Karen got back to Jupiter. “Yes. I have the group photo with me. Perhaps you can come by my hotel? I am under strict instructions not to leave, but I guess I could just go to the bar for a short time and meet you there.”

“That’s wonderful!” Jupiter said. “We’ll come now and give you a call when we are in the bar. See you there!”

They said goodbye and Jupiter hung up. Bob and Pete had already guessed most of it from Jupiter’s answers, he told them the rest.

“It’s better than I thought,” Jupe said. “Now if we know what Nicola’s boyfriend looks like, we can look out for him.”

They quickly packed up their gear and went down into the lobby. Here stood the cabinets in which they had stored their sports equipment.

Jupiter wanted to grab his skis, but stopped. “Funny, didn’t I always put it on the right side?”

“The day was probably a bit long—even for your mastermind,” Bob replied. “I, for one, don’t remember it.”

“Yes, I would,” Jupe replied. “I am very particular about order. Strange.”

The other two, however, did not take him seriously.

They took the bus to the Sonnenalp Hotel, got to the bar and called Karen. She came down in less than two minutes.

“Here’s the photo and this is Nicola’s boyfriend. His name is Stefan Graff,” Karen said pointing to a tall man in the photo. He was blond.

Now it was important to memorize how he looked like, so the three took turns to look at the photo.

“Roughly how tall is he?” Jupiter asked.

“Well, about Pete’s height,” Karen replied.

The three then thanked Karen and promised to let her know if there were new developments. They left the bar to go to the mountains to watch Nicola train. The most promising lead right now was Stefan Graff.

At the ski lifts, Toni rejoined the three of them and met Pete for the first time. Jupiter and Pete could ski together and Bob also had company while snowboarding.

Despite the good organization at the ski lifts they had to wait a while for their turn. They hit right into the main stream of families who needed longer in the morning until they were all ready to go. Directly in front of them in the queue, a small child lost his ski, probably the binding was too loosely adjusted. He stood in the middle of the way and yelled. Then it was finally their turn and up they went in a four-seater chairlift towards the sun and the snow.

Of course Toni was curious of what had happened the night before. Bob told him about Pete’s escape and let himself be praised again extensively by the other two for his snowmobiling skills. Toni was impressed, but also a little jealous. He would have loved to have been there.

“Well, how was it with your parents?” Jupiter asked. “Exciting?” A little naughty, Bob thought.

But Toni replied calmly: “Well, they allowed me to spend all day and all evening with you three today.”

While the landscape slowly passed by, the friends looked all round from the chairlift. Now that they were looking for the blond Stefan Graff, they saw blond people everywhere. Even on the chairlift directly behind them, a blond man seemed to stare at them.

A moment later, they reached the ski lift station. “I’ll fold up the safety bar, Jupe and I have to get off at the front,” Pete said. While Pete and Jupiter were already starting out on their skis, Bob and Toni strapped down their boards.

“Come on, let’s go,” Toni said. “The weather is so great and the snow...”

Bob interrupted him: “Toni, wait up, I think something has happened up ahead!”

13. Jupe's Circus Performance

A few skiers had stopped on a slight hill and looked down the slope next to the track. With a few swings Bob and Toni caught up with them. Someone lay far down in the deep snow and tried to get back on his feet. He had gone off the track and must have fallen head-first down the slope. Another skier approached him, probably to help.

"Hey, that's Pete!" Bob yelled.

"I guess that's Jupiter lying down there in the snow." Only now did he notice that there was a ski in the snow right in front of them and that the second ski was a long way away. No doubt they were Jupiter's skis. The tracks were clear—up there he had stumbled and then sailed down the entire slope...

It must have looked spectacular! Now Pete was with Jupiter and reached out his hand. Slowly Jupiter got up.

"A déjà vu experience is what you call it," Toni told Bob. "We've seen this before. Why do we of all people always have to witness these dangerous falls?"

Meanwhile Jupiter and Pete slowly trudged up the slope to get back to the track. The other skiers went on. Among them was also the blond from the ski lift, who had arrived directly behind the friends at the station. Bob and Toni collected Jupiter's skis. Jupiter sat down on the snow puffing. "With this performance, I'll should be in a circus," he announced.

"People will cheer for you," Bob smiled. "I'm glad you survived the dress rehearsal so well."

"How did you even do that?" Pete wanted to know. "I just saw a huge snow cloud."

"Too bad," Jupiter said. "My first loop was really remarkable, even for an experienced snowboarder." He smiled at Bob and Toni. "But I bet someone helped."

His friends looked at him in horror. "What do you mean?" Bob asked.

"I think my right ski came loose too soon. I skied after Pete, lost some control and got too fast. When I wanted to slow down on a hump on the edge of the track, my shoe went out of the binding and I flew head-first down. With such small unevenness! The binding was off! That could have really gone wrong. Luckily, the slope became a little flatter, so that I could lie down."

"I'll take a closer look at your ski binding," said Pete, reaching for Jupiter's skis. A quick glance was enough for him. "The binding was turned down to zero!" he shouted in horror. "For a, well—Jupe, you forgive me for saying this—let's say an average skier like you, that's already very dangerous! The ski releases from the foot at the slightest resistance."

"Then I really observed something this morning," said Jupiter. "Last night someone tampered with my skis and then accidentally put them upside down in the ski cabinet."

"That's a sign," Toni said, "that you got too close to the devil skier. It's a counter-attack."

"Then it's a bad sign," Bob said. "Now it's getting very dangerous for us too."

"We must find him," Jupiter said. "Now it's pure coincidence that nothing worse has happened."

"By the way, I saw a blond man standing up there," Pete said. "But he doesn't look like Stefan Graff."

Bob replied resignedly: "Not just one, Pete. We've met dozens of them today."

"Only one thing surprises me," said Pete, "that our nightly dear visitor at the ski cabinet has chosen you of all people as his victim, Juve. The SPEED people should have been more interested in me."

"Maybe a coincidence, or a mix-up," Toni threw in.

Jupiter looked at him sharply. "It wasn't a coincidence. They wanted to get at Karen's cousin."

Pete made some temporary adjustments to Juve's skis so that he could use it. But he still needed to get them fixed by a service technician. The four boys decided to slowly glide to the training site.

"We'd better look out for the two SPEED employees," Pete said. "I'd avoid them at all costs."

At the training site, they noticed Nicola was at a table with her service technician, Karl, discussing something. A short while later, she left and walked hurriedly to the refreshment tent. From the way the discussion ended, there might have been a dispute.

"We must seize this opportunity," Jupiter said resolutely. "Let's go to her now."

Nicola, sipping a Coke, looked nervously back and forth in front of a list of names hanging on the wall. She noticed Jupiter and she looked a bit friendlier, as Bob found.

"Hi, Nicola."

"Hi, Jupiter, Bob and Toni. And who are you?"

"Pete," the Second Investigator introduced himself, "a friend of Jupiter and Bob."

Jupiter took the floor. "Nicola, you've been upset out there. What was that all about?" He smiled at her nicely. "Was it about racing tomorrow?"

"Yes, my technician, these..." she began and then continued rattling on in German. Nobody needed to understand the language to see that she was upset about something. The investigators need to know what happened, so Toni again stepped up with the interpretation.

Nicola was unsettled with Karen's accident yesterday, and they still wanted to persuade her to race tomorrow. They told her to take her chance, because Karen won't be there... However, she's not going to let those jerks get away with this!

"When you said 'they', who exactly are 'they', Jupiter interjected.

Nicola threw out an angry look. She was referring to two SPEED employees, obviously the investigators knew exactly who they were. According to her, they interfere in everything. Actually, they work for SPEED development, in the research of new skis. They were also the contact persons of SPEED's service technicians, including hers.

"How do they always interfere?" Bob asked.

"They tell her where and when she should race," Toni interpreted. "Or they nag about her skiing technique."

"Did they tell you about a new ski?" Pete asked.

"No, why?" Nicola asked.

"Well, they're launching something," Pete elaborated. "We heard that on the sidelines. Are you racing tomorrow?"

"I might not!" Nicola replied. "I haven't decided yet."

"What will your boyfriend say then," Jupiter said. "After all he wanted to come to the race, didn't he? Wouldn't he be disappointed?"

Nicola understood that he would come tomorrow. She believed that he didn't know about the events of the past few days. To him, her success came before everything else. That was why he had often involved in her races. He had helped her whenever he could, but sometimes

it was almost too much for her. For tomorrow, once she had decided, he won't be able to change her mind.

14. Surveillance Plans

Nicola had asked her service technician, Karl to fix Jupiter's skis.

"How did the binding come off?" Karl wanted to know.

"Unfortunately, they fell into the hands of a completely unprofessional person," Jupiter said dryly.

Jupiter thanked Karl. Then Toni and The Three Investigators set off again, not without Pete catching a quick glimpse of Picabo Rhoades doing some stretching exercises.

"Come on," Jupiter nudged him.

They didn't need to go very far till the next widest spot.

"Do you think Karl is involved?" Pete wanted to know.

Jupiter shook his head. "I don't think Nicola or Karl are in it. Of course, Karl represents the interests of his ski company, but they might keep him out of the bigger picture. They would let Nicola achieve her success in peace. Meanwhile, they're behind the scene making devious plans. That's my theory."

Suddenly Pete nudged Juve and pointed up the slope at a skier. "Look at that show-off, how he approaches and provokes that group of people with his swings."

Bob agreed. "Looks like a ruthless skier. Look, the others are avoiding him."

Then the skier left the group and sped directly towards the four friends. Shortly he passed them and was gone.

"That was him!" Pete, Bob and Toni shouted at the same time.

"Yes, he really looks like Stefan, and he could well be the devil skier," said Jupiter.

There was a moment of silence.

"So he's here after all," Bob said. "What kind of game is he playing?"

"Follow him," Jupiter shouted. "Let's go after him!" The friends set themselves in motion. Realistically, there was no way of catching up with Stefan. Pete had the most realistic chance, and soon he moved ahead of the others. "We'll meet at the apartment!" Jupiter shouted after him.

When Juve, Bob and Toni had finally reached the edge of the town, there was no sign of either Pete or Stefan. They decided to go to their apartment together with Toni. Especially now that it was lunchtime.

While Bob took care of the spaghetti and Toni assisted him, Jupiter went to the phone to call Karen. He expected her in the same dejected mood as in the morning. But when Karen answered, her voice sounded firm and clear. "Hi, cousin. I received another message again."

"Message?" Jupiter whistled through his teeth. "You mean another warning message?"

"Yes. It was left at the reception by a little boy. He has probably nothing to do with the whole thing and was only used as a messenger. After all, the sender wouldn't dare to come up to my room."

"And what does it say?"

"Yes, it's very strange. It's about you all—'The race is coming. Don't think about your friends.'"

"What an honour," Jupiter said.

“The message surprised me as I was still very tired,” Karen said. “I still need to understand things slowly.”

“We’ll start thinking about this message. Speaking of which, I’m now in this game. This morning I was the target of a sabotage.” And he told Karen how his intentionally-loosened ski binding almost led to a serious accident.

“We have our guardian angels with us,” said Karen, “so see you later. And slowly tell me what you’ve come up with.”

Jupiter hung up. At the same moment, the electric cooker in the kitchen and the front door bell buzzed. The spaghetti was done and Pete was back.

Since Pete had to tell his story, his plate was still half full when Jupe, Bob and Toni went for a second helping.

Stefan had actually skied away from him. But when Pete went down the last slope, he had spotted the blond walking off with skis on his shoulder into the town. At a safe distance, Pete followed him. Every now and then Stefan turned around—maybe to look for pursuers—but Pete always managed to turn away inconspicuously. So Stefan had led him to the hotel where he was staying. It was called Snowhut. Pete watched when the blond got his keys at the reception, then he left.

“Very good,” praised Jupiter. “Let me just make a quick check.” He got up, took the phone book and dialled a number.

“Snowhut hotel? I’d like to speak to Mr Stefan Graff,” Jupe asked on the phone. “Yes, thank you.” He quickly hung up the phone. “Now it’s confirmed. Stefan Graff is there—even under his real name—in Room 112. The lady at the reception was about to put me through to him.”

Pete punched the table with his fist. “It has to be him. He’s blond and he’s ripping the slopes here, even though he should be miles away. Most importantly, he has a motive—he is helping Nicola with her races by eliminating her rivals, possibly without her knowing.”

“This ties in with what we learned from Nicola just now,” Bob remarked. “The only question is how do we get him? We don’t have any proof. And he can keep playing his game.”

Jupiter nodded. “As a matter of fact, and he’s already doing it. I called Karen a while ago and she told me that she received a new message this morning.”

His friends looked at him in astonishment. “That guy’s got a lot of nerve,” Bob said. “What did it say?”

““The race is coming. Don’t think about your friends.””

Pete leaned his chin against his hand. “What could that mean again?”

“He’s having a lot of fun with these messages,” said Toni. “A cat-and-mouse game. There’s always a little hint hidden—‘Eyes on the slope’ was followed by the accident with the branch.”

“And you know what?” Jupiter interrupted him. “The latest message mentioned Karen’s friends. So it was a warning that he was targeting Karen’s friends to unsettle her. So what happened? I was sure my skis were in the wrong place this morning. Now I believe that they were tampered with and it was all part of the game. We just didn’t get the message on time.”

“It was a little hidden clue, so to speak,” Pete remarked. “And Stefan laughed his ass off because we didn’t get it. Probably not even the encounter on the slopes was a coincidence, but a sign of his feeling of superiority.”

Bob had been listening the whole time in silence. “I’ve been thinking about what Toni just said about the previous message,” he said thoughtfully. “It was a hint on what is going to happen. Now if we apply that to the latest message... ‘Don’t think of your friends’... Don’t

think about what happened to your friends today... Don't think about the tampering of his skis!"

"That must be it, that is it!" Jupiter exclaimed. "And the race's coming. Stefan seems to think she's racing tomorrow. He might tamper with her skis."

"Today's the last day before the race. I think we have to do something today," Pete said. "We have to stop the devil skier before he puts someone in the hospital."

"I can think of a few things we could do," he said. "First and foremost, if he is going to tamper with Karen's skis, we have to warn her to take precautions. Sure, Jürgen would be able to spot if the skis were tampered with but it might be too late in case Karen wants to race. So it can be as simple as this—keep her skis in another location, and put a spare set in the usual place."

"Great," Pete said. "That'll be easy. What else should we do?"

Bob then said: "I just thought of this—if Karen is not racing tomorrow, then there will be no point in tampering with her skis. If so, we will not be able to catch the perpetrator here. How about if we get Jürgen to sound out to Nicola and Karl that Karen will ski tomorrow after all. For security reasons, however, she was not registered. We hope that Karl could tell our two friends, and either they or they could get Stefan to do the dirty job."

"Good idea. I'll inform Karen and see what she says," Jupe said. "In any case, we have to next look at the suspects—that's Stefan Graff and the two SPEED guys. At this moment, we can't tell whether they are working together, so we have to keep tabs on them."

"Should we have someone watch over Karen's skis—in this case, the spare skis?" Pete asked.

"Stefan may expect someone to watch the skis and try to enter unobserved. Or he'll think of something else," Jupe said. "The way I see it, his athletic ability will drive him to make good on his threat. Maybe he's just giving the sentence a different meaning. He seems to want to be a little smarter."

"How about this?" Pete suggested. "Stefan doesn't know that we already suspect him. We'll just watch him at his hotel. If he has something else in mind, maybe if he doesn't even go for Karen's skis and just wanted to distract us with the threatening message, we're still on to him."

"Good point, Pete," Jupe said. "I suggest that Pete and I will watch Stefan tonight. Even if we lose sight of him, we'll know his destination and I can inform Jürgen straight away."

Pete sat up. "If an opportunity arises, we'll even be able to look around his room."

Jupiter nodded. "I've thought of that too. But the most important thing is that we'll always stay on his heels and follow him if necessary. If possible, as Pete has suggested, we'll check his room to see if we can find some evidence, like the ski glove he left behind, which he obviously retrieved before the police came."

"He could have thrown it away if he's smart," Toni said.

Jupiter disagreed. "Not necessarily. Then why would he go get it back? Probably didn't see us and thinks the glove hasn't been discovered or photographed."

"If we don't find the ski glove in his room, he might have thrown it out after all. But if we find it, we'll have our evidence," Bob said. "And MacManoman can match it with our photo from the crime scene—provided he gets the film developed properly."

Jupiter smiled at the last remark and agreed with Bob. "Right, Bob, it's an opportunity we should take."

Toni turned to Jupiter. "Then what about the SPEED guys?"

"Bob," Jupe said. "You will monitor them at their hotel. Perhaps you get there earlier to check if they are in and watch their movements. So far, the two SPEED guys have stayed out

of Stefan's activities. I guess they don't want to get their fingers dirty like that. If they change their minds tonight, you have to stop them somehow. Otherwise there'll be too many of them for us to handle."

"I'll think of something," Bob promised. "What if nothing happens tonight?"

"I don't think so," Jupiter said. "The situation is getting too tense—the messages, the accident, and the race is tomorrow. If anything, they'll have to act tonight."

Toni slid restlessly back and forth on his chair. He didn't appear in Jupiter's plan. "What about me? I want in too."

"Sorry, Toni," Jupiter said. "I couldn't ask you to take the risks in our case, especially when you are a tourist here. In any case, you have helped us tremendously in the past few days. For this last part of the investigations, I'll have to leave you out."

"That's okay," Toni replied. "I understand. Anyway, I have to meet my parents for dinner tonight. We'll be watching the race tomorrow, and on Monday, we will fly back to Austria."

"We'll meet up with you tomorrow for the race then," Jupiter said. "And now, let us get to work!"

15. Pete's Special Assignment

The Snowhut hotel was situated in the middle of a small park. Only a few lights of the town penetrated through the fir trees. But the moon bathed everything in its cool light, which made the scenery even more mysterious.

Jupiter and Pete had put on thick sweaters under their ski suits because they didn't know how long the night would be for them. Under two closely spaced trees, the two detectives were able to look particularly well into the illuminated lobby, which connected the two three-storey wings of the hotel. The side walls of the hall were completely glazed. One of the two exit doors was on their side, the other on the opposite side. Jupiter and Pete could also observe them well through the glass panes.

It was early in the evening. The guests should be preparing for dinner. Some rooms were lit up. Stefan's room—Room 112—should be on the first floor.

"I'm very grateful to you, Jupe, for not suggesting that I take care of the SPEED people. I've had enough of them for now," Pete said.

"That's why I've got Bob for that task," Jupiter replied. "They don't recognize him that well yet. Besides, tonight we might need your athletic form... and your lock picks."

"I'd rather have a nice cup of tea at the bar," Pete said. "Who knows how much longer we'll have to huddle out here in the cold. What happens if Stefan goes to bed and sleeps while we freeze to death here?"

"On the contrary, if the lights go out in his room, we'll be on red alert. We shouldn't be relying on waiting for him in the foyer. We have to find out which of the windows belong to his room."

"How about you turn on your mastermind?"

"You don't need a mastermind to determine that room 112 is on the first floor. But on which side it lies and the layout of the rooms within a floor, even my mastermind would not know."

"Why don't you take a look?" Pete urged.

"Pete, I was thinking more of you because you're the lock picking expert," Jupe replied. "I will stay out here to be on the lookout."

"Okay, so how do you suggest I go about it?" Pete asked.

"First, we have to determine which room is his so that we can monitor it from out here," Jupiter said. "This part is simple. You just go in as if you are one of the hotel's guests and go and check out which one of these windows is for Room 112. Then we can monitor his movements from out here."

Without wasting any time, Pete set off. When he entered the lobby, a porter was busy making a phone call. Nevertheless, he looked up for a moment. Pete greeted as normally and friendly as a guest of the hotel would have, and as calmly, but purposefully, he walked towards the stairs.

Then he reached the first floor. The side he chose was correct. On the right side, after a storage room, the numbers 101, 102 began and on the left they ended with 131, 132. Then room 112 had to be on the right side, i.e. on the side that Jupiter and Pete had been able to observe from below. 106, 107, 108... Pete walked down the aisle. Finally, there it was—

Room 112. Seen from the outside, it had to be the thirteenth window if he included the storage room in his count. He then went back downstairs and casually walked out the hotel and rejoined Jupiter among the trees.

“Got it,” Pete reported. “Thirteenth window directly in front of us. I took a good look at the lock as well. I think I can crack it quickly. Also, I can’t see any security cameras, but I am not too sure.”

“Good, the light at window number thirteen are on,” Jupe said. “Also, note that the windows are opened. Perhaps he wanted to air the room. If he goes out, you go in and see what you can do. I’ll be on the look out from here and will signal to you if necessary. But we will now wait.”

Pete moaned. “My need for adventure is satisfied! Anyway, I don’t know if our plan was really that good. What do we do if this guy gets away? Or if we need Bob? We have no contact with him whatsoever.”

Jupiter put an arm around his friend’s shoulder. “Don’t despair, Pete. Don’t be distracted by the creepy surroundings and the cold. We have been in tighter situations before!”

“You’re right, Jupe. Waiting here really made me nervous,” Pete admitted.

Suddenly, the light went off at the thirteenth window. The two friends stared into the lobby. A man emerged from the right wing of the building and walked across the reception. “That’s him!” Pete’s voice trembled slightly. Jupiter recognized him, too. Stefan only wore sweaters and jeans. That suggested he didn’t want to go out. He talked to the doorman for a moment, then he disappeared into the left wing of the building.

“He’s going to eat,” Jupiter surmised. “Down to the left is the restaurant. Pretty early. But maybe he has plans today. Definitely a good opportunity for us. Pete, you know what you have to do.”

“Okay, I’m going in,” Pete said. With that, he left their hiding place and walked towards the entrance.

At the first floor, there were nobody at the corridor leading to Room 112. Pete casually walked towards the room, while looking again for any security cameras. He had his right hand in his trousers pocket holding a lock pick he had chosen for the job. At the room, he inconspicuously inserted the lock pick and a while later, unlocked the door. Pete breathed a sigh of relief.

He went in, closed the door and locked it from the inside. The first thing Pete felt was cold because the window was opened.

Meanwhile, Jupiter stood under the fir tree. Slowly he got cold. He looked over at the hotel. Nothing remarkable.

Jupiter noticed that in Stefan’s room a small light came on, perhaps a bedside lamp. The curtains were drawn open and Jupiter could observe a shadow occasionally scurrying along the wall. Did Pete managed to break into Stefan’s room and look for the gloves or some other clues?

Then he saw Pete appeared briefly in the light. As always, Jupiter thought if an opportunity arose, Pete would take it. However, he hoped that he would hurry up. Meanwhile, Jupiter looked in the other direction again as he had to watch the lobby.

While keeping his eyes on the lobby, Jupiter thought briefly about the phone conversation with Karen. It had taken a long discussion to convince Karen and Jürgen to join in. They were agreeable to hide the skis in another location, but were quite sceptical when it

came to telling Nicola and Karl of Karen racing tomorrow. On the other hand, they saw no reason not to try. There was nothing to lose.

Suddenly something jolt him from his thoughts. “Oh, no!,” he exclaimed. “Here comes Stefan!”

Jupiter knew there was only one thing he could do to help his friend. The window was opened, so Pete should be able to hear him. He left the trees and ran underneath the window. Then he gave the Red-bellied Flycatcher call, which had already served them so well last night. He paused and called a few more times. But Pete didn’t seem to notice.

Pete opened one drawer after the other in the light of the bedside lamp. Then he opened the cupboard doors. If he found the gloves or even the dark red and black ski suit, that should be enough as evidence. Pete had to smile at that thought. He concentrated on his search quietly. Stefan’s dinner would take a while. Why should he come back early?

There were no ski gloves in the compartments. Just sweaters, underwear, two ski suits, one of which was dark—but not dark red and black. Carefully, so that he left no traces, Pete put the ski clothes back into the cupboard compartment. He closed the door. His gaze fell on the large travel bag that stood at the foot of the bed.

He reached out for it. It was not locked. So he unzipped it and checked out the contents. Only casual clothes—T-shirts, track pants and the like. There were nothing suspicious. So he zipped it back.

Suddenly Pete heard footsteps in the passage. He got all jumpy. He hoped that the footsteps were those of a guest from another room.

The footsteps came closer and closer. Where would he hide? The cabinets were too small and very risky. If Stefan came back now, he could have forgotten something and could look in there. The bathroom? The shower? Oh yes, the light was still on. Pete quickly switched off the bedside lamp just in time.

Then he heard the familiar Red-bellied Flycatcher call outside. At the same time, he heard a key being inserted into the keyhole. And he was still standing in the middle of the room. Beads of sweat dripped from his forehead.

Now it was hard to keep calm. The window! Of course! It was the first floor, so Pete swung out onto the window sill and looked down. Below him were deep snow. There had to be grass underneath. He jumped. The same moment he landed in the soft snow, the light went on in the room above him.

Jupiter had observed everything from below the window, without being able to intervene. He took a deep breath after Pete landed on the snow. Seeing that he was all right, both quickly pressed against the wall of the house, walking along it for a while and then scampering over to the dark protection of the fir trees.

“That was close, my friend,” he said to Pete and patted him on the shoulder. “But it was exciting to watch you on your special mission. Your jump out the window deserves top marks.”

“Thanks, but I could have done without the dramatic escape.”

“So, did you find the gloves or the ski suit?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I looked almost everywhere, though. Stefan came back early. He must have eaten fast food.”

“Or the menu didn’t convince him.”

“It’s a good thing we have to cook ourselves and not go out for dinner,” Pete joked.

After all, the two detectives now knew which room they had to observe. Whether Stefan had noticed anything was not quite clear. He looked out of the window for a moment, then closed it immediately and pulled the curtains together. The light inside stayed on.

"My feet are slowly freezing," Jupiter said.

It was a feeling that Pete could not understand at the moment. "Funny, I'm all warm."

"Your blood pressure will go down again."

Pete put a finger on his lips. "Psst, I don't think so," he whispered. "Yours will rise sooner. Look, there's a man over there by the group of trees."

Jupiter looked over. In fact, the man was hard to spot in the dark, but obviously there was a person standing in the shade of the trees. "What's he doing here?" Pete thought.

"Either he's watching the hotel or he's watching us," Jupiter whispered.

Pete's voice sounded irritated. "Hopefully not those SPEED guys again! I don't like this evening. I feel more and more that it's us who are being watched, not Stefan."

"Even if it's hard, we have to keep a cool head," Jupiter said. "Just like you just did in Stefan's room. We must take the initiative."

Jupiter looked around. He couldn't see another person with that man. That was a chance. "Watch out. That man is alone, there are two of us. Unlike him, we can split up. So let's split up."

Pete looked at him startled. But Jupiter calmed him down.

"Just for a little while, Pete," Jupiter explained. "This time I'll take the harder part. We go into the lobby together, just cross it and leave it through the exit on the opposite side. There we separate. We walk around the building, me on the right and you on the left. This has the advantage that we will get back together here."

"The man must then react, he must come out of his cover. After all, he can't split into two. Either we surprise him here in front of the lobby when we come from both sides. Or he doesn't move out of his cover, then one of us sneaks up on him from behind."

"And what if I get back and you're not here?"

"Pete, then you keep walking along the building in the direction I need to come from. Remember, there are two of us."

"And why is your part harder?" Pete asked.

"I'm going around the right side of the building. My way leads past the trees where the man stands."

"Okay, First Investigator." Pete admitted that this was a way to get things moving. It wouldn't take much time either.

There was still light in Stefan's room. Hopefully he wouldn't be leaving the room right now. The two quickly walked towards the lobby and entered without turning around. Jupiter deliberately greeted the porter, who looked up at them in astonishment. They quickly approached the opposite exit and went out. It wasn't until out in the dark that Jupiter looked around. No one had followed them into the hall. The porter was still looking at them in amazement. "Let's split up, Pete. See you soon."

"See you soon!"

Jupiter sneaked along the hotel wall. His eyes got used to the pale moonlight again. He didn't notice anything else. There were no unusual noise, only muffled voices from some rooms above him. A light wind came up and the branches of the fir trees swayed. Jupiter had to look around with concentration and made sure he didn't miss anything. At the first corner of the building, he slowed down his pace. Now he came to the side of the hotel, which the mysterious observer could possibly see him. But Jupiter should also be able to see the man.

Carefully, he looked around the corner. A few metres away, the trees under which the man had just stood moved slightly in the wind. Jupiter had a good view of the place. There was no one there. So the man may have followed them into the hotel. Now he had to be quick to surprise the man at front of the entrance.

Jupiter squeezed around the corner and sneaked on.

Suddenly Jupiter saw from the corner of his eye a big, mighty shadow came out of the darkness behind him. Strong arms closed around him like chains. Jupiter let out a short but muffled cry.

“Well, well. Look who’s here!” someone grumbled right behind him. Jupiter could barely breathe, his arms held him so tightly. Nevertheless, he managed to turn his head. He looked into a face he knew all too well.

MacManoman grinned gloatingly at him. “Jupiter Jones. Are you at one of your crazy party games again? Hide-and-seek? Scavenger hunt?”

The tension in Jupiter was instantly released. MacManoman, as annoying and condescending as he might be, in the current situation he preferred him a thousand times over another encounter with those SPEED guys. But before he could answer, MacManoman signalled to him to be quiet. “Let’s wait for your buddy.”

So Pete should also be taught a lesson. MacManoman stood right behind the other corner of the building. Jupiter heard fast footsteps along the hotel wall. Pete had apparently dropped every precaution when he did not see Juve at the agreed place. The first thing Jupiter saw of Pete was his face looking around the corner. It slid right in front of the policeman’s thick bulbous nose. Startled, Pete flinched and then came to the fore. For today he should have had enough drama, Jupiter thought compassionately. MacManoman laughed and pulled Pete over to Jupiter. “All right, sports fans, let’s get out of here and talk! What are you doing here?”

There was no point in pretending to MacManoman. Especially Pete’s nerves were on the edge. So Jupiter began to tell them that the three of them were working here as detectives and he was not Karen’s cousin. MacManoman listened amusedly and did not interrupt him. Jupiter pulled out their business card and presented it to MacManoman. “We’re kind of colleagues,” he muttered.

MacManoman studied the card. “Nice,” he said. “Speaking of which, I have greetings to you from Chief Reynolds.”

Jupiter and Pete stared at each other. Then MacManoman knew about it!

“Of course, I checked your records and found out you weren’t related to Karen,” MacManoman reported. “My police colleague, Chief Reynolds, told me some nice detective stories about you. If it wasn’t for him, I would have kicked you right out of Vail. But he told me to let The Three Investigators do their thing. Every now and then you’d have a very promising idea.” He smiled. “And I’d like to hear them now. But we’d better go to somewhere warmer for that.”

The trio went on their way. Good old Reynolds, Jupiter thought, as difficult as he could be, they had a long common history. The Three Investigators had a long standing collaboration with the Rocky Beach Police Department. Their regular contacts there were Chief Reynolds and Inspector Cotta. In many of their cases, the three had provided the police with very important information leading to solving crimes.

But it hurt Jupiter very much that they had fallen into MacManoman’s trap. Their whole plan had been overturned. Did the policeman see Pete’s little trip to Stefan’s room? They hoped not. After all, it was a break-in.

“How long have you been watching us?” Jupiter asked. “It was you who was standing between the trees over there, wasn’t it?” MacManoman stomped through the snow and

nodded. “Coincidence. Admittedly I hadn’t been there long. I’m afraid you discovered me as well.”

“And what brought you here?” Jupe asked.

“Probably the same reason that brought you here—to check out Stefan Graff.”

16. The Tide Turns

Bob and Toni walked together towards the Sun Park hotel. Toni had wanted to stalk the perpetrator and help Jupiter and Pete, but he understood Jupiter's concerns for his safety. Maybe it was just as well that there were the two of them there.

Toni had his snowboard with him, and only had that evening left to enjoy the slopes of Vail. For tomorrow, all eyes would be on the race. He said he would look for The Three Investigators tomorrow and wished Bob success in the investigation. A short distance before Sun Park hotel, he left Bob and went off towards the ski lifts.

On reaching the hotel, Bob quickly found out from the reception that the two SPEED employees, Patrick and the bearded one, were in their room. Then he made himself comfortable on a leather armchair in the foyer, where he had a good view of the stairs and the lifts.

Bob's thoughts wandered to Jupiter and Pete, who may have been on the verge of solving the case, while he had to sit there and wait. But somebody had to do this job too, Bob realized that. Then he thought of Toni, who could be snowboarding alone. He had courage.

Various guests entered the reception hall. However, Bob did not see anyone familiar. He turned around. Behind him were phone booths. Maybe he could use the time to get in touch with Elizabeth. He wanted to talk to her and tell her everything. Bob got up and went to the phone and made the call while looking out for the SPEED guys. Elizabeth answered on the third ring.

"Bob! Hello! I'm glad you called. Really, I do. I'm in a terrible mood right now."

"Why?"

"Well, because it's the holidays and tonight there's absolutely nothing going on. Lys and Kelly are up to something, and you're away again. I am sitting at home getting frustrated."

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth. I know it's hard sometimes with our spontaneous missions. Maybe detectives should take their girlfriends with them more often."

"Or detectives shouldn't have girlfriends!"

Bob stopped for a moment. "I've heard something similar to that recently."

"So, by whom?" she asked. "Who would complain about your regular absence?"

"Not in relation to me, Elizabeth. It was Karen Sulzenberger, the German skier who had survived a skiing accident. She told Jupiter that as a professional athlete, she had no time for a boyfriend."

"Well, does she have a boyfriend?"

"No. But she had one once."

"And that became too much for her? Did she kick him out? Or was it the other way round?"

Bob was silent. It suddenly worked feverishly in him. Elizabeth had triggered a thought that had probably rested in him the whole time.

"Elizabeth, I think we three detectives missed something," he said in a trembling voice. "Can you imagine anyone being jealous of your girlfriend's success? For example, success in skiing? Perhaps to the extent that he can't cope with the fact that his girlfriend disappears

more and more into the ski scene and has less and less time for him? Their friendship breaks down and he has the feeling that he has lost it to the sport, so to speak?"

"Sure, in my present mood, I can understand that very well."

"And that his feelings turn into hatred—hatred of success, hatred of skiing, and ultimately hatred of other people?"

"You gotta be pretty crazy to go to that extent, or you have to get really involved. But it is possible, of course. Who knows what's going on in lonely hearts? But that's the kind of problems people usually talk about. Besides, a girlfriend is not private property. He must like her just the way she is, and maybe even supports her."

"Yes, that's the way it should be, Elizabeth. But you yourself noticed how such a situation can arise. And speaking of unconditional support—we have an example of this extreme here. Stefan Graff, the friend of Nicola Schalla, wants to push her to success. Sometimes even Nicola finds this too much for her. He is the direct opposite of Karen's ex-boyfriend, so to speak. We have suspected that Stefan was involved in the suspicious activities so far."

"Bob, your thinking makes sense. So now you think Karen's ex-boyfriend has something to do with it?"

Bob said yes. "I'm almost sure now. That would fit the incidents well, perhaps even better. Jupiter was also attacked. We were wondering, why him of all people? He's posing as Karen's cousin and is the one with the closest contact with her. Maybe that's why the ex-boyfriend picked him. A kind of jealousy too."

"That could be an explanation."

Bob kept talking. "Come to think of it, I just recalled something else. At Jupiter's accident this morning, we saw a blond man who wasn't Stefan Graff. He caught our eye, but we didn't think anything of it. After all, there are many blond people here. But what if he was the ex-boyfriend?"

"Then why not find out what the ex-boyfriend looks like?"

Bob now spoke quickly and frantically. "Elizabeth, we've already set a trap! But we miscalculated. Jupiter and Pete are trailing Stefan, who may not be the culprit. They may be losing valuable time following the wrong guy. And..." Bob became boiling hot.

But if Bob's theory was correct, there was no more time to lose. He said goodbye to Elizabeth. The first thing he wanted to do was to try to reach Karen. But the fastest way was to call her to find out more about her ex-boyfriend.

Frantically, Bob called Karen at her hotel. Fortunately, she was in her room.

"Karen, this is Bob," Bob said rapidly. "It's urgent, but I don't have much time to explain. Jupiter and Pete are elsewhere on this case. You have to trust me, because I really need to get some information from you."

"Sure," Karen replied. "What do you need to know?"

"Your ex-boyfriend," Bob asked. "Is he blond?"

"Yes. Uli is blond. Why?"

Bob just ignored the counter-question. "Why did you break up?"

"Well, it wasn't even a year ago. It started with the ski performance group. There was always a fight between us. He didn't accept that I enjoy professional skiing and that I travel so much. He boycotted it all, didn't want to get to know the other girls or the coaches."

Bob got more and more excited. "Did you see him after the breakup?"

"No. He behaved so unfairly, yelled at me, said I belonged to him. It was all pretty annoying. I'm glad it's over. He was a plain mistake, fortunately only for a few months."

"Does he ski well?" Bob asked.

“Yes, Uli skis very well. That’s why it annoyed him so much that I was progressing in sports and he wasn’t. Do you suspect him?”

“Would it be absurd if I did?”

Karen paused for a moment. “No...” she finally said thoughtfully. “It’s possible. I never really understood him. He’s very self-centred.”

“Karen, do you have a photo of Uli?”

“No, not with me here.”

“Okay, what does he look like?” Bob asked. “Could you describe him?”

“He’s pretty tall, slightly taller than Pete. Blond, as you already know, and he’s got a pretty big nose. But I thought you are checking on Stefan although he is not due here till tomorrow.”

“We now know that Stefan is already here—in another hotel. Perhaps he wants to surprise Nicola. That would be a simple explanation.”

“Well, it is also not surprising that he is at another hotel,” Karen said. “Remember I told you that friends and husbands are not allowed to stay overnight in the team’s hotel.”

“Oh yes,” Bob said. “We were pretty stuck with our theory, but neither one nor the other has been proven yet. Not to mention the messages. They are not exactly very clear to us.”

“Regarding the last message, I was pretty concerned about it,” Karen said. “Since it mentioned ‘friends’, I got a hunch that it may be referring to you guys, rather than my skiing friends.”

“Yes, and Jupiter’s ski incident yesterday probably confirms it.”

“Actually, I am worried about you guys,” Karen asked. “Where are you and your friends now?”

“I should be okay as I’m at the Sun Park hotel,” Bob replied. “Jupiter and Pete are at the Snowhut hotel keeping an eye on Stefan Graff. The two of them together should be okay as well.”

“Uh... then what about Toni?” Karen asked.

“Toni’s not one of us detectives,” Bob began. “He’s a tourist.”

“Yes, but how would the perpetrator know? Most of the time, you four are together.”

This struck Bob like a bolt of lightning. “My gosh, of course!” Bob exclaimed. “Toni is also your friend as far as he is concerned!” Bob had to think quickly.

“Toni is in danger!” he said. “This is very urgent! Karen, I need Jürgen’s help!”

Karen’s hotel was nearby. Now Bob had to leave the surveillance of the SPEED men.

Toni had already completed one round of snowboarding, where he tried out some new tricks he saw others do. The sun has not set completely and it was bright enough that he could still see the scenery. By the time he reached the bottom and decided to go for one last round.

At the bottom station of the ski lift, there were still some activities. Toni went into an empty four-seater chairlift. Quite a number of slopes of the skiing area were already in the shade. The sun would set in an hour’s time.

From his chairlift, Toni watched the last skiers on the slopes below him move downhill. Then Toni turned around and looked whether someone else was going up the mountain behind him. The next two chairlifts were free. But then he froze. On the third chairlift sat a blond man wearing a black ski suit. The distance was too great to see his face more closely. By stature, it could be Stefan. Had he escaped from Pete and Jupiter? If so, Toni had to be cautious.

Then a thought occurred to him, he didn't know how Stefan looked like. Toni didn't see his photo, only the three detectives did, and he only got a glimpse of Stefan when he skied passed them earlier in the morning. Anyway, he quickly brushed that thought aside, as the three should be well on the devil skier's trail.

Nevertheless, it was too dangerous to snowboard alone when it would be dark soon, so he decided that it had to get down fast. To be cautious, he wanted to make sure and wait for the blond guy at the end of the ski lift.

When Toni got off with his snowboard at the top station, the lift attendant stopped him. "The tracks will close soon, but you can still go down now," he said in a friendly manner. "We'll check every track again at the end."

Toni nodded. "No problem, I'll be down soon."

He moved a bit away from the ski lift and looked around. The blond would be getting off soon. Toni stooped down and pretended to check his shoe. In reality, he observed the ski lift exit with concentration. The blond skier had arrived at the top. The lift attendant talked to him, probably telling him the same thing as before. Then the skier fastened the buckles of his ski boots.

He skied off, driven by a powerful stick action and a few steps. When he passed Toni, he was pretty fast. The man looked down briefly on the snowboarder, who was still stooped down.

Toni stood up relieved. The skier doesn't look like Stefan Graff as far as he could tell from the earlier glimpse of him. His nose alone was far too big for that. Nevertheless, the blond looked familiar to him. Wasn't he the one who stared at them from the chairlift behind him this morning?—this morning when Jupiter fell a little while later?

"It could be a coincidence," Toni said to himself. "Just don't get nervous." Anyway, he thought, he'll just continue on.

Toni chose his route and carefully approached the edge of the forest. He met a few more skiers. The blond guy with the big nose didn't show up. "So it was a coincidence," Toni thought. He stopped for a while to enjoy the scenery.

The sun was fast setting and it rapidly got darker where he was. He heard a pleasant humming sound that he concentrated on until it faded away.

Suddenly, a noise made Toni flinch. Right behind him near some trees, there was a rustling sound. Stay calm... Maybe it was just an animal. It rustled behind him again, this time a little further away.

Then a figure came out from the darkness of the woods. It was a man—the man who got off the chairlift after him. He was on his skis about ten metres from Toni.

"Is that the devil skier?" Toni thought. "What does he want from me?" He broke out a sweat, but reacted coolly by starting to glide downwards on his snowboard.

The man started to follow Toni.

17. Chase Across the Snow

The devil skier set off after Toni. With only less than ten metres between them, Toni clearly heard the pursuer behind him. He desperately tried to escape, as tree branches swept across his face. His lead became increasingly smaller.

His nerves were fluttering. With wide curves, the devil skier tried to get closer to Toni. The skier had a clear advantage—he was more experienced on the slopes and was faster.

Then the devil skier suddenly slipped away. He had obviously seen an unevenness ahead, perhaps even an ice sheet. That was Toni's chance. The pursuer must have fallen and disappeared behind a small hill. For a moment, there was nothing more to be seen of him. Toni rode close to the hill and slowed down sharply. Behind it could be the pursuer, but Toni was not sure.

It might also be a trap. He carefully glided around the hill in a slower pace. There was nothing to see. Toni released his snowboard again and slid a bit further. He flinched. His nerves were tense, but he thought it was over.

Suddenly from the side, something dark and not recognizable flew towards him. He ripped up his arm to protect himself. Then he realized it was just snow. Wet and cold it fell down Toni's neck. At that moment, the dark figure of the devil skier swung in very close to him. Immediately, Toni let his board run. Now the pursuer was right behind him.

A short distance away, Toni saw his chance. The skier would have to take a long, flat right turn. The track led much further down again directly to the foot of the ridge he was riding on now. Toni decided immediately to take the shorter way. He raced beyond the regular track towards the edge of the mountain, slowed down a bit and jumped on the steep slope. He then went straight downhill, down the untouched deep snow slope. What he usually enjoyed as his greatest riding experience, riding off-track in deep powder snow, now became a daring but also a promising shortcut.

The powder snow splashed under the snowboard. Toni raced through holes covered by snow, over humps and between tree roots. He saw many obstacles only at the last moment. In some places he jumped, sometimes he flew. But Toni was a good snowboarder and highly concentrated. Now or never he had to widen the gap from the devil skier. For a short time, he noticed him coming from the right side of the track. Toni had overcome the steepest sections, the slope became flatter and it was not far to the regular slope.

However, the skier was fast, really fast. Toni assessed him, bent down. The snowboard below him cut a razor-sharp, wonderfully round line into the hard snow. Only a matter of time, the skier caught up and approached Toni at almost the same speed. They could soon touch each other.

Toni was still a bit ahead of the devil skier and he thought he could escape again. But the pursuer began to use his ski pole to poke at him. Toni was scared.

Then Toni seized his only chance—he jumped. With momentum he tore up the board, stretched his legs and hit the devil skier slightly on the hip. The pursuer spun around, took off, and flew on his back. Toni quickly got back on his snowboard, and went on.

Then he heard a noise—the familiar sound of a snowmobile. The devil skier got back on his feet and also saw the snowmobile approaching him. Toni was already speeding towards

the vehicle. As he came closer, he heard a familiar voice: "Toni! Toni! It's me, Bob!"

Toni was relieved. Then he realized that it was Jürgen at the front with Bob behind.

"It's the devil skier over there!" Toni shouted, pointing in the direction of the skier. "He was after me!"

"Not a problem," Jürgen shouted back. "We'll get him! Hang on Bob!"

Then it all happened very quickly. The devil skier saw what happened. Now he had to flee. He was about fifty metres away and so got a head start. Jürgen stepped on it and began the chase. Toni saw the excitement in front of him, turned back, and followed the pursuit. Now the hunter became the hunted.

The lines of carving, the cut swing, drawn hard and loudly on the freezing snow, had to make the devil skier's ears crack with fear. Although he was a damn good skier, he was no match for the snowmobile, as the slope was moderate, so the skier could not go as fast as he wanted.

Jürgen closed in very fast, but he was careful not to go directly behind the devil skier. When he brought the snowmobile near to the side of the speeding skier, Jürgen shouted: "*Uli! Uli! Du kannst nicht entkommen!*"

Then it happened. The ground was uneven and the skier was moving very fast and lost control. After a few metres, the man was left in the snow. Clearly, Bob noticed that the devil skier was a blond man with a conspicuous nose. When Uli wanted to get up cursing, he immediately caved in again. He had obviously injured his leg during the action.

Jürgen stopped the snowmobile. With a short sprint Bob went up to the fugitive and pushed him into the snow. "We finally got you, you devil skier!" Bob shouted triumphantly.

The man in the snow scolded something back in German. Bob didn't understand him. But it didn't matter anyway.

A short while later, Toni came up. Bob could clearly see how Toni was frightened. "That was a close one," he rasped with a hoarse voice. "Thank you all. I wouldn't have gotten away from Stefan without your help."

"You didn't need to get away from Stefan," Bob said. "Because he isn't the culprit. The devil skier is Uli, Karen's ex-boyfriend."

"The one with the big nose," said Jürgen.

"A blond guy with a big nose," Toni repeated slowly. "Yeah, he went up the chairlift behind me. So he's been watching me the whole time."

Then they heard humming noises behind them. When they looked back, they saw two snowmobiles approaching from the valley. Both stopped right in front of them. Two well-known figures jumped out from the first vehicle.

"Bob! Toni!" Jupiter shouted. "And who's that over there?"

"The devil skier," Toni called out. "He's hurt and not going anywhere."

"That's not Stefan Graff!" Pete exclaimed in astonishment.

"No," Bob said and held his head. "Karen's ex-boyfriend Uli is our man."

On the other snowmobile was Detective MacManoman. This time it was the policeman's turn to look surprised.

Bob pointed to Uli. "We'd have someone here for you to take care," Bob said. "If you wish. He's man you're looking for—the one we called the devil skier."

Now all the self-confidence and arrogance of MacManoman's face had disappeared. "How did you all end up here?" he said. Bob took the floor and told his story.

"Oh, and ask Uli about his connections to SPEED," Bob added.

"SPEED," MacManoman wrote down in a little notebook. He had already written several pages full.

MacManoman then spoke on his mobile phone, presumably to alert his police colleagues. After that, he proceeded to speak with Jürgen and Toni as he may need them to make a statement.

Meanwhile, Bob turned to Jupe and asked: “Now tell me why you have appeared here at such a convenient time?”

After Jupe, Pete and MacManoman saw no progress monitoring Stefan Graff, Jupe had called Karen and she hastily told him that Toni could be in trouble with the devil skier although she did not mention who that might be. She then said that Jürgen and Bob went up the slopes to get Toni. That was when Jupe convinced MacManoman to get them a snowmobile and together go look for them.

Shortly, two more police officers arrived on snowmobiles. Then MacManoman slowly found his way back to his old role. “Okay, sports fans, I’m gonna take this guy in for questioning. And if he really did it, I’ll do something I rarely do—Congratulations!”

Jupiter nodded. “Will we see you at the race tomorrow?”

“I’m sure. So long!”

18. The Race Gets Underway

“I’m on Picabo Rhoades,” Pete said, looking at Jupiter provocatively.

“Karen Sulzenberger will win the race,” Jupiter defiantly replied.

Bob shook his head. “I think she’ll be happy after all this fuss if she gets to the finish line in one piece. I think Nicola will win the race.”

“I disagree,” Toni was loudly heard. “Petra Hofer will beat them all!”

Bob grinned. “Petra Hofer? Never heard of her. Is she from a tiny country in the Alps, a region south of Germany?” Toni gave him a big hug in the arm.

“It’s okay, Toni,” said Jupiter smugly. “Bob doesn’t know the name of this important country. It is, well, it is... Switzerland, isn’t it?” The Three Investigators laughed and Toni laughed too.

They stood together at the finish area of the race track and waited for the start of the women’s downhill race.

After Uli had been arrested, both Karen and Nicola had decided to take part in the race. “Don’t expect too much,” Karen had said. “I won’t be skiing full steam yet as I missed some training sessions. If I get into the top 15, I’d be very happy.”

There were a lot of spectators. Several thousand people waited alone around the finish area for the arrival of the racers. The story about Karen had attracted additional attention. Also all the main television stations were there. The German race management arranged for the four friends to follow the race in a delimited zone intended for ‘very important guests’.

Now a speaker announced the beginning of the race.

There was immediate excitement. Nicola Schalla would be the first racer. On a monitor the four friends could see Nicola skiing down in the upper sections of the race track. The first intermediate times were displayed—what they were worth would only become apparent with the other racers. Then Nicola became visible coming towards the finish line. Applause flared up—1:43.22 was her end time. She braked, took off her helmet and put up her SPEED ski, as all the racers do to promote their ski company.

Then a lesser known Austrian skier was on her way. Toni was terribly excited. He barely noticed that MacManoman had joined them.

“I congratulate you,” he said. The Three Investigators smiled. Toni also turned around now, especially since the Austrian’s time did not come close to that of Nicola. “Uli confessed,” reported MacManoman. “We also found the gloves you photographed and the dark red and black ski suit in his hotel room.”

“Wait a minute,” Pete interrupted him. “Picabo is on her way. Super intermediate times.” But when she crossed the finish line, she was just behind Nicola. Picabo took off her helmet. She still seemed satisfied with her time. Pete couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“Do you know who Uli was supported by?” MacManoman asked.

“SPEED?” said Pete, without losing sight of Picabo Rhoades, around which many reporters had gathered in the meantime.

MacManoman nodded. “Yes, two men working in the development of SPEED. Somehow they got to know of Uli’s threatening messages. Since they wanted to wipe out ZACK and

Karen anyway, they supported him and even paid for his flight and hotel room. I arrested them for complicity and support.”

“Yes, let’s go!” Toni interrupted him. Petra Hofer had started. MacManoman frowned because of the interruption. He had obviously expected a more concentrated audience.

Petra also drove a great race, but it wasn’t quite enough. She was currently in third place behind Nicola and Picabo. Toni shrugged her shoulders. “Well, next time, then,” he said.

MacManoman took advantage of the break and spoke again.

“The CEO of SPEED has also commented on the matter. His company denounced such dirty tactics, and claimed that it was an isolated case initiated by the two employees.”

“Well, let’s hope it is, then,” Pete said flatly.

At that moment an outcry went through the audience. Anneliese Lutz from Switzerland had set a new intermediate best time. MacManoman kept quiet voluntarily. The friends watched the race with excitement. Anneliese was able to maintain her lead and even slightly extend it. With 1:42.78 she was clearly ahead. Cheering, she pulled her arms up.

“That would be hard to beat,” Jupiter said realistically. “Now there won’t be any more strong racers except Karen, but she won’t be skiing to best of her ability.”

“But it is Anneliese’s treat,” said Pete. “She’s helped Karen a lot.”

“And besides, none of us got it right. We can all live well with that,” Jupiter said. He looked at MacManoman as if to mean he could go on.

The policeman had gotten used to the fact that he only had a chance to speak in parts. Now he pulled out a cardboard roll.

“Here’s a little thank you from us,” he said. “We’ve developed your photos—handcrafted.” He unrolled the photos.

Toni was the first to laugh. “That’s you?” he shouted with delight. The photos showed Juve, Pete and Bob with their girlfriends. But they were disguised as punks and techno-hippies.

“Well,” Jupiter said a little meekly. “It was a costume party. And something wild about it. But the photos are really good.”

MacManoman grinned, but said nothing.

“I agree,” Bob agreed. “By the way, we’ll get another thank you present. I spoke to Mrs Seven on the phone this morning. Guess what she promised us?”

“A copy of the great print hanging in the painter’s apartment? The one with the children reading crime thrillers in front of a camp fire,” Jupiter replied.

Bob looked at him disappointed. “How did you know that?”

“My mastermind is working very well today,” Jupiter proudly said. “The picture will be given a place of honour at Headquarters.”

Bob nodded. “Sure. And besides, Mrs Seven has another new case for us.”

“Shall I guess?” Pete asked. “The history exam papers have disappeared?”

“That should be okay with me!” Bob said, “No, the tyre slasher we’ve been after has now got to her car.” Jupiter and Pete laughed.

“Well, life goes on,” Bob quipped.

At this moment Karen Sulzenberger was announced as the next racer. The friends followed the start and then the race in the upper part of the race track was electrifying on the TV monitors. Even MacManoman stared spellbound at the screen. She was fast, but not fast enough to endanger Anneliese or Nicola at the top. I hope she doesn’t fall, Bob thought.

Now came the curve where she escaped the accident two days ago with ‘luck and skill’. The TV monitors showed Karen in close-up. She started the swing, got on the edges. The audience cheered her on. Then the bend, taken clean—and Karen was through.

“Phew,” Jupiter exclaimed. He leaned back a little. Those were decent intermediate times. That’s when Karen came into the spectators’ field of vision. Jupiter jumped up, then the others. She was already in the finish area, speeding with the last few metres to go. Fifth best time. The spectators cheered and the friends fell into each other’s arms.

“This race was very important for her,” MacManoman said. “I’m sure she’ll recover from it.”

Jupiter nodded to him and looked at Karen. She hugged some racers in the finish area, including Anneliese and Nicola. Then she looked around searching and saw the four friends. Jupiter saw that Langbinder showed up and wanted to stop Karen. He waved over to Bierbichler, who once again was struggling with his TV camera at the back of the crowd of people. Langbinder didn’t stand a chance.

For Karen Sulzenberger, who shone all over her face, had already rushed towards The Three Investigators and Toni, who were waving enthusiastically. Now, they were sure that there would be a big hug for each of them.